INSTRUCTOR PRESENCE IN ONLINE COURSES:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF STUDENT
AND INSTRUCTOR PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Online learning is experienced by students and instructors at many universities, and enrollment has continued to increase in recent years (Legon & Garrett, 2017; Legon & Garrett, 2018). Several researchers have identified elements of instructor presence or the various roles instructors play in courses (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, Richardson et al., 2015) and how those elements affect students (Hosler & Arend, 2012; Ladyshewsky, 2013; Lear et al., 2009; Ma, Han, Yang, & Cheng, 2014; Tanner, Noser, & Totaro, 2009). The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of instructor presence and its effects on students through the lens of both instructors and students.

Instructors and students in undergraduate online courses shared their experiences regarding the elements of instructor presence. Qualitative data were collected through individual instructor interviews, student participation in an individual interview or online qualitative survey, and end of semester student surveys. There were many consistencies between students and instructors of the same course. The two groups usually agreed on whether or not the course went well. In some courses, the instructor assumptions of what students experienced were in line with the students’ reports. There were, however, some discrepancies in areas such as assessment feedback, grading practices, and web-conferences.

Overall, study results showed that instructors and students find course organization and consistency to be beneficial in providing a good experience and keeping students on track. Instructors provided varying degrees of feedback on assessments, and some students indicated the desire for more detailed or timely feedback. Students and instructors indicated
communication as vital for an online course. While not experienced often, technology issues can greatly deter a course. Several instructors expressed that they cared about the students’ success in their course and careers. Students shared their appreciation for instructors caring about them and how it affected their attitude toward or participation in the course. Instructors also showed that they cared about their students’ success beyond the classroom by taking steps to help students gain skills needed in their profession or discussing career options. Some students noted that they had applied course concepts in their jobs.
DEDICATION

To all who believed this would happen even when I had doubts.

Especially to Momma –
My number one fan, comforter, encourager,
prayer warrior and unwavering supporter.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Graduate school and the dissertation process was certainly a journey, but I did not get through this on my own. I am so very grateful to have had many people helping, encouraging, and supporting me along the way.

My dissertation chair, Dr. Rice: You have been on this journey with me from the beginning. From the program application to coursework to the dissertation process, you have been answering my many questions and calming my anxieties. Thank you for your patience, guidance, and support.

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The participants in this study: This literally would not have happened without you. If you ever happen to read this, know that I have immense gratitude for your participation.

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God: I have talked to you a lot the past few years. Thank you for grace, strength, and carrying me through this.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Over a 30% of students in higher education institutions enroll in online classes each year (Legon & Garrett, 2017). For every fourteen students enrolled in a four-year public university, one student takes online courses exclusively. Despite dropping enrollments rates in higher education over the past few years, enrollment in online courses has continued to increase (Legon & Garrett, 2017; Legon & Garrett, 2018).

In Fall 2014, more than 20.1 million students were enrolled in higher education institutions. Over 5.8 million, or 1 in 4, students were enrolled in at least one online course at the undergraduate or graduate level in the United States of America. Of that total, 2.85 million students, or 1 in 7 of the total, exclusively took online courses. This is a 7% increase in enrollment from 2013. Enrollment in higher education as a whole has declined, while enrollment in online courses continues to grow (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016). In Fall 2015, the number of students enrolled in only online courses increased to 2.87 million, while the number of students taking some online courses increased to 3.43 million (Legon & Garrett, 2017). In 2016, most institutions surveyed reported either an increased or similar enrollment in online courses (Legon & Garrett, 2018).

In a survey of administration at higher education institutions, the majority of respondents indicated that online courses are source of revenue (Legon & Garrett, 2017; Legon & Garrett, 2018). Approximately 77% of chief academic officers of institutions offering online courses indicated that online courses were critical to their strategic plans in 2014 and 2015 (Allen et al.,
Common strategic goals among universities related to online education are the growth of enrollment, improvement of degree completion, expansion of access to and the number of online programs, and improvement of course quality. Many institutions, especially those with large online enrollments, are planning to add more online programs in the future (Legon & Garrett, 2018).

Approximately one-third of the total 2,175 faculty respondents of a nationwide survey reported that they have taught at least one online course and approximately twenty-seven percent have taken an online course themselves (Straumsheim, Jaschik, & Lederman, 2015). The perception of faculty acceptance of online courses as a legitimate form of education has remained low over the past thirteen years, and seems proportional to the number of online students at their institution. Only about 60.1% of chief academic officers of institutions with at least 10,000 online students report that their faculty accept online education. About one-third of these leaders agree that faculty attitudes toward online learning is an obstacle in online growth (Allen et al., 2016).

With the increase in higher education enrollment and universities including online learning in strategic plans, it is reasonable to study factors of student success. One factor that has been shown to affect retention rates as well as satisfaction and student engagement in online courses is the instructor presence in the course for graduate and undergraduate students (Ladyshewsky, 2013; Lear, Isernhagen, LaCost, & King, 2009; Moore, 2014). In fact, 81% of faculty with and without online teaching experience surveyed in a study by Straumsheim et al. (2015) rated having meaningful student-instructor interaction as a very important component of a quality online course.
Statement of the Problem

In 2015, about 30% of students took at least one online course (United States Department of Education, 2018), and approximately 30% of instructors taught at least one online course (Straumsheim et al., 2015). Most institutions’ online enrollment remained consistent or increased in 2016 (Legon & Garrett, 2018). It is clear that online learning is experienced by a large number of students and instructors in higher education.

Since online teaching presence has an impact on student satisfaction, student engagement, and retention in online courses (Ladyshewsky, 2013; Lear et al., 2009; Moore, 2014), it will be beneficial to know what instructor presence means to students and instructors, whether there are differences in perspectives of instructor presence between students and instructors, and whether differences exist based on academic discipline.

Theoretical Framework

In qualitative research, theoretical frameworks provide guidance on how to study phenomena (Creswell, 2013). The theoretical framework guiding this study was derived from research on Teaching Presence, a construct initially outlined in the Community of Inquiry Model (Garrison, Archer, & Anderson, 2000) and the research on Instructor Presence conducted by Richardson et al. (2015).

Community of Inquiry Model

The Community of Inquiry model was developed to explain the learning experience of students in online courses. As shown in Figure 1, the Community of Inquiry has three parts: Cognitive Presence, Social Presence, and Teaching Presence. Where two of the constructs overlap, parts of the learning experience occur. The three main constructs of Cognitive, Social,
and Teaching Presence overlap and work together to provide a full picture of the online learning experience (Garrison et al., 2000).

*Figure 1. Community of Inquiry Model. [Adapted from the Community of Inquiry Figure 1. (Garrison et al. 2000).]*

Cognitive presence refers to the students’ ability to absorb the materials and construct meaning for the topics covered in the course. In an online course, cognitive presence may be affected by communication with the instructors and fellow students. The assessments and learning materials selected can also encourage students to think more critically (Garrison et al., 2000). Social Presence is the student’s capacity to participate in class in a social context. The learning experience can be enhanced through discussion and collaboration with other students. The goal is for students to communicate with each other in a real way so that a community is developed where they feel like they are collaborating with people rather than just posting to a discussion board (Garrison et al., 2000).
Teaching presence encompasses the course design that occurs prior to the course delivery as well as facilitation and direct instruction the instructor provides during the semester. Course design includes the structure of the course and selecting assignments and instructional materials. Facilitation of the course includes various elements of communicating with the students during the course. Direct instruction may include online lectures and assignment feedback (Garrison et al., 2000).

In a follow-up study, Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001) identified specific indicators of teaching presence in each of the three categories: Design and Organization, Facilitating Discourse, and Direct Instruction. The indicators of teaching presence are listed by category in Table 1.

Table 1

**Teaching Presence Indicators According to Anderson et al. (2001)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Design and Organization</th>
<th>Facilitating Discourse</th>
<th>Direct Instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Setting Curriculum</td>
<td>● Identifying areas of agreement/disagreement</td>
<td>● Present content/questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Designing methods</td>
<td>● Seeking to reach consensus/understanding</td>
<td>● Focus the discussion on specific issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Establishing time parameters</td>
<td>● Encouraging, acknowledging, or reinforcing student contributions</td>
<td>● Summarize the discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Utilizing medium effectively</td>
<td>● Setting climate for learning</td>
<td>● Confirm understanding through assessment and explanatory feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Establishing netiquette</td>
<td>● Drawing in participants, prompting discussion</td>
<td>● Diagnose misconceptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Assess the efficacy of the process</td>
<td>● Inject knowledge from diverse sources, e.g., textbook, articles, internet, personal experiences (includes pointers to resources)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Responding to technical concerns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Adapted from tables 2, 3, and 4 (Anderson et al., 2001)]
Application of COI Framework in Research

Using the Community of Inquiry as a framework, a researcher can explore the student experience through all three presences or by focusing more deeply on one. Since 2000, several research studies have been conducted with the Community of Inquiry framework as the theoretical framework. Some of these have included evaluating the three presences in a specific online course (Lambert & Fisher, 2013), using it as a base for design of a course for international students (Randrianasolo, 2013), and evaluating the relationship of cognitive presence and technology readiness (Abraham, 2013). The Community of Inquiry has also been the framework of choice for several studies on instructor presence from the student perspective (Kupczynski, Ice, Wisenmayer, & McCluskey, 2010) and from the instructor perspective (Kennette & Redd, 2015).

COI Used to Develop other Frameworks of Instructor Presence

Other research has focused on outlining the elements of instructor presence or the role of the instructor in the online course and built upon the research on teaching presence in the Community of Inquiry. Hung and Chou (2015) identified five roles held by instructors in online courses. Their research indicated that instructors hold the roles of “course designer and organizer (COD), discussion facilitator (DF), social supporter (SS), technology facilitator (TF), and assessment designer (AD)” (Hung & Chou, 2015, pp. 317-318). This is in alignment of the COI perception that instructor presence includes both the course design as well as the course facilitation elements of communication, technology support, and assessment (Garrison et al., 2000).

Richardson et al. (2015) described the concept of instructor presence as the overlapping of teaching presence and social presence. They differentiate instructor presence and teaching
presence based on observability. They write that while teaching presence includes course design, course discourse facilitation, and direct instruction, instructor presence is more specifically those actions that instructors take in facilitating the course rather than the course design.

In their study, Richardson et al. (2015) investigated the activity of thirteen online instructors in order to establish instructor roles. Five categories of instructor presence were established by grouping similar instructor activities, and some of these spanned multiple aspects of the Community of Inquiry categories of teaching presence. These are Advocating, Facilitating, Sense Making, Organizing, and Maintaining (Richardson et al., 2015). These five roles are closely tied to the roles identified by Hung and Chou (2015) as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Presence</td>
<td>Social supporter (SS)</td>
<td>Advocating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Presence – Facilitating Discourse</td>
<td>Discussion facilitator (DF)</td>
<td>Facilitating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Presence – Facilitating Discourse, Direct Instruction</td>
<td>Social supporter (SS)</td>
<td>Sense Making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Presence – Facilitating Discourse, Direct Instruction</td>
<td>Course designer and organizer (COD) Assessment designer (AD)</td>
<td>Organizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Presence – Design and Organization</td>
<td>Technology facilitator (TF)</td>
<td>Maintaining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Presence – Direct Instruction, Design and Organization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The category of Advocating refers to advocacy for the students and includes being available as needed and encouraging students in their coursework and professional endeavors. Facilitating course discussion includes introducing the topic, asking follow-up questions to engage students, encouraging students to think about topics in different ways, and keeping
students on track. In the role of Sense Making, instructors provide examples to help students learn content, correct student misconceptions, and then provide constructive feedback on assessments (Richardson et al., 2015).

Organization of instructional content, learning activities, and assessments is established by the instructor. Organization also includes providing clear assessment instructions, due dates, and course policies. Maintaining the course requires instructors to provide a level of technical support and address logistical issues. Instructors guide students on using the required technologies and navigating the course. The instructors also send email reminders to students as needed (Richardson et al., 2015).

Instructor Persona

In addition to the five roles that instructors embody in an online course, Richardson et al. (2015) discussed how elements of social presence can be incorporated to enhance instructor presence. These elements include what personal information the instructor shares as well as their communication style. The instructor sets the tone for communication and models how formal or informal communication should be. Instructors can also use tone and emphasis to better convey assessment feedback or in explaining course concepts (Richardson et al., 2015, 2016). These social aspects in combination with the teaching roles can help students to see the instructor as a real person participating in the course (Richardson et al., 2016).

Theoretical Framework Applied to This Study

This study focused on one type of presence that was discussed in the Community of Inquiry: Teaching Presence or Instructor Presence (Garrison et al., 2000; Anderson et al., 2001). The five categories of instructor presence provided by Richardson et al. (2015) were used to
Instructor Presence was explored through the lens of both students and faculty in online courses through a case study at a public research university. The researcher asked students in multiple courses about their experiences in an online course and the roles of the instructor in an online course. Instructors of each of those courses were asked about their experiences teaching an online course and how they think that their teaching practices or presence affected the students’ experience in the course.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and compare student and instructor perspectives of instructor presence in online courses in various schools within a university at the undergraduate level. This information provides insight into what students have experienced and value in terms of instructor presence, what instructors are currently doing, what instructors see as beneficial to students, the challenges instructors face in providing instructor presence, and the similarities and differences between the instructor and student perceptions.

Significance of Study

The information gathered from this study may be used to improve the online course experience for both instructors and students by informing future course design, course facilitation practices, and training for faculty as well as preparation and resources for students. Administrators, the university elearning office, and instructional designers may be able to use this information to inform future training for instructors and provide better guidance to instructors new to online instruction. This study may provide insight into challenges that instructors face in providing instructor presence in online courses. Instructors may use
information from the study to adjust teaching practices or to inform students of practices or expectations.

Conclusions drawn from this study may also be used by administrators or academic advisors to provide guidance to online students on what to expect from an online course and some possible challenges to consider. Additionally, this qualitative study adds to the body of research on instructor presence in online courses as well as the research on student and instructor perspectives of or experiences in online courses.

**Research Questions**

The overarching research question explored in this research study is: *What are students’ and instructors’ perceptions of instructor presence in online courses?*

Additional subquestions include:

1. What are students’ experiences of instructor presence in online courses?
2. What are instructors’ experiences of instructor presence in online courses?
3. What are the similarities and differences between student and instructor experiences of instructor presence in online courses?
4. How do students perceive factors of instructor presence affecting their online course experience?
5. How do instructors perceive factors of instructor presence affecting the students’ online course experience?
6. What are similarities and differences between the instructor and student perceptions on how instructor presence affects the students’ experience in online courses?
7. How do instructors of different disciplines perceive instructor presence?
8. How do students in different disciplines perceive instructor presence?
Methods

This study explored the perceptions of instructor presence in online courses of students and faculty of undergraduate courses at a public research university in the Southeastern United States. When reviewing the population of undergraduate and graduate students, undergraduate students comprised 90% of the enrollment in online courses. Therefore, this study focused on the undergraduate student experience and how that was perceived to have been affected by instructor presence. The majority of previous studies about instructor presence utilized quantitative methods (Ma, Han, Yang, & Cheng, 2014; Paechter & Maier, 2010; Stanford-Bowers, 2008; Tanner, Noser, & Totaro, 2009) or used mixed-methods with just a few open-ended questions (Hosler & Arend, 2012; Kupczynski et al., 2010; Ladyshewsky, 2013; Lear et al., 2009).

This study adds rich detail to the research on instructor presence in terms of the instructors’ and students’ perspectives. Through individual interviews with instructors who taught undergraduate online courses in Fall 2017, qualitative survey and interview data collected from students who took those courses, and the IDEA (student end-of-course surveys) comments, the experiences of the students and instructors were analyzed. The IDEA surveys are the standard surveys that the university uses for each class each semester to assess the students’ experience in courses. For this study, only the qualitative data (student comments) were reviewed.

Reviewing the accounts as expressed through the participants’ own words provided a clearer understanding of how students and instructors perceive aspects of instructor presence and how the actions of the instructor affected the students’ experiences in the undergraduate online course. Themes were drawn within and amongst courses. Experiences among students across courses and experiences among instructors across courses were discussed. Differences between
instructors and students were reviewed. This study also presented a direct comparison with instructors and students of the same courses and school, and it included courses from multiple disciplines.

**Assumptions of the Study**

The following assumptions were made for this study:

1. Instructor participants answered the questions honestly and to the best of their ability. Instructors answered the questions based on the specific course and semester in the study.

2. As requested, instructors who agreed to participate in the study emailed the students of the appropriate course and semester to request participation.

3. Student participants answered the questions honestly and to the best of their ability. Students answered the questions based on the specific course and semester in the study.

4. Students answered the IDEA survey questions honestly and to the best of their ability.

5. In agreeing to participate in the study and acknowledging the letter of consent, participants acknowledged that they are at least nineteen years of age.

**Limitations of the Study**

Limitations of this study include the following:

1. Data collected relies on participants’ memory of experiences occurring up to one semester prior to the interviews and research surveys.

2. Due to difficulty in acquiring student participants, the number of student participants was smaller than anticipated.

**Delimitations of the Study**

Delimitations of this study include the following:
1. Not all schools within the university were represented in the study. This made comparing results across disciplines difficult.

2. Participants include instructors and students from courses in two schools. Courses in other schools may have had different results.

3. Participants are from one university in the Southeastern United States. Experiences in online courses in other universities or other parts of the country may be different.

**Operational Definition of Terms**

*Face-to-Face Course*—courses that are scheduled to occur on the university campus on specific days and times. These courses may be enhanced with the learning management system and other online tools, however multiple on campus meetings are required. Also known as an *on campus course* or *on ground course*.

*IDEA*—IDEA is a company that administers and analyzes student surveys for universities. Surveys are distributed to students in online and face to face courses during the last week of classes each semester. Surveys are taken online and are anonymous. Results are provided to instructors electronically. IDEA is not an acronym; it does not stand for a longer name.

*Instructor*—person teaching the course regardless of employment level—includes tenured, non-tenured, and adjunct faculty. Instructors may or may not have research responsibilities. Years of experience in teaching in general and in teaching online vary. Locations of the instructors vary; they may or may not be located in the same city as the university. Also known as *faculty*.

*Instructor Presence*—ways that instructors are present in the course include the design of the course, the content chosen for the course, the interaction of the instructor in the course
through communication and grading feedback, and support provided for student use of technology. Also known as or related to *teaching presence*.

**Learning Management System**—online platform in which the majority of the course content delivery, assessment, grading, interaction, and communication occurs. Common learning management systems include Blackboard, Canvas, Desire2Learn, and Moodle. Also known as *course management system*.

**Online course**—courses designated as online in the university registration system. These courses are at least 80% online. Some may require campus visits for orientation or testing. All instruction, communication, assessment, and feedback are completed online through the learning management system, email, or other online accessible sites. Tests are completed online, and students may be proctored using an online proctoring service in some courses. In some cases, students may be required or encouraged to attend virtual meetings at a specific time or to schedule virtual meetings with peers.

**School or college**—an organized entity within the university that is dedicated to one or more specific disciplines (i.e., college of science).

**Students**—those enrolled in the online courses. Students may be in a fully online program (only taking online courses) or taking some online courses while taking other courses on campus. Students participating in the study are all at least 18 years of age. Participants may be full-time or part-time students. Since this study focuses on online courses, students may be or may not be located in the same state as the university.

**Third-Party Tools**—any technology used in the online course that is not directly part of the campus adopted learning management system. Common third-party tools include publisher tools (Cengage MindTap, McGraw-Hill Connect, Pearson MyLab, WileyPlus, etc.), social media
tools (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), communication tools (GoToMeeting, Blackboard Collaborate, VoiceThread, etc.), and collaboration tools (GoogleDocs, wikipages, etc).

Summary

Online education is experienced by a large number of students and instructors in higher education in the United States, and enrollment in online courses continues to grow. This study explored the perceptions of instructor presence in online courses from the student and instructor perspectives. The perspectives of the two groups of participants were examined to identify similarities and differences and to further understand how the activity or presence of the instructor affects the experience of the student in an online course.

Chapter I provided background information on online education in higher education, the purpose of the research study, and the importance of the research topic. Chapter II discusses the literature on the current state of online education, elements of instructor presence, and the effects of instructor presence on student satisfaction and retention in online courses. Chapter III describes the student participants, faculty participants, and setting of the study. It also provides the methods for recruiting participants, collecting data for a qualitative case study, and analyzing the data collected.

Chapter IV presents the findings of the study. An analysis of student and instructor responses from the various methods of data collection are provided. Common themes among students, common themes among instructors, differences among instructors, differences among students, and comparisons between students and instructors are discussed. In Chapter V, the purpose and methods are summarized. Conclusions drawn from the study and implications of those conclusions were explored. Finally, the researcher provides recommendations for further research on instructor presence in online courses.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In this chapter, literature related to research of instructor presence in online courses is discussed. The chapter begins with a definition of online education, the prevalence of online education in higher education in the United States, and why students and faculty choose to take and teach online courses, respectively. The next section defines instructor presence and outlines the elements of instructor presence and roles of the instructors in online courses.

The literature review then discusses the effects of instructor presence on student engagement, satisfaction, retention, and outcomes in online courses. Research on instructor experiences and challenges with providing instructor presence in online courses will be explored. Lastly, a review of previous research on the comparison of student and instructor perceptions in online learning will be presented.

Definition of Online Education

Online courses are those in which the student views materials, communicates with peers and the instructor, and completes assessments in an online learning environment. Some online courses require students to attend tests or certain sessions on campus while others do not require any in person activities. There are different values for the amount of content that must be delivered online for a course to be considered online. According to the United States Department of Education (2014), an online course has few or no face to face meetings. The Babson reports have used a threshold of 80% of course activity that must be completed online to be considered
an online course while IPEDS states 100% of course activity must take place online, except for
campus orientations or testing (Allen et al., 2016).

**Prevalence of Online Education in Higher Education in the US**

More and more students are choosing to take online courses over traditional, on campus,
courses. The number of students enrolled in at least one online course and the number of students
who only take online courses continues to increase. In the fall of 2014, 12.5 percent (United
States Department of Education, 2014) to 14 percent of college students or 2,858,792 students
were enrolled only in online courses (Allen et al., 2016). In the fall of 2015, about 2.87 million
students were enrolled in online courses exclusively, and in 2016, online-exclusive enrollment
increased to 2.9 million (Legon & Garrett, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

Additionally, about 13.3 percent of students (United States Department of Education,
2014) or 2,970,034 students took at least one online course bringing the total percentage of
students who have taken at least one online course to 28% (Allen et al., 2016). This provided a
seven percent growth in enrollment in online courses from Fall 2011 to Fall 2014, while the
enrollment overall in higher education has declined (Allen et al., 2016). In Fall 2015, the number
of students enrolled in at least one online course, but not enrolled solely in online courses, was
3.1 million (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) or 3.43 million students (Legon &
Garrett, 2017). Enrollment in at least one online course increased to 3.3 million in 2016
(National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

**Why Students Take Online Courses**

Online courses provide students with some freedom that does not come with traditional
courses. Students and faculty both cite the flexibility as an appealing feature of online courses
(Armstrong, 2011; Bair & Bair, 2011; Stanford-Bowers, 2008; Tanner et al., 2009; Wright,
2014). Students and instructors in online courses have the flexibility to complete their work from
any location and at times that are convenient for them. They do not have to attend class at a specific time or place. Students also indicated self-pacing, and the lack of having to attend a physical class as benefits to taking online courses. While noting these benefits, students and faculty acknowledge that online courses require students to have a greater level of self-discipline (Armstrong, 2011; Fedynich, Bradley, & Bradley, 2015; Tanner, Noser, Fuselier, & Totaro, 2006; Tanner et al., 2009).

In one quantitative study which compared the perceptions of online learning of business and non-business students, students indicated that the discipline of the course may affect their decision to take the course online or face to face. Students recommended subjects such as history, psychology, and management to be taught online, with the business students giving a higher recommendation than the non-business students (Tanner et al., 2006).

In another study by Tanner et al. (2009), when asked if non-quantitative courses should be offered online, instructors and students did not indicate a preference. Both business and non-business students indicated they would rather take courses such as math or statistics in a traditional classroom (Tanner et al., 2009). This study does not, however differentiate between the disciplines within the group of the non-business students. They also do not include qualitative data of why these subjects should not be taught online or how instructor interaction may be different in different course.

**Why Instructors Teach Online**

With the continued increase of online courses (Legon & Garrett, 2017), there is also an increase in need for instructors to teach those courses. Instructors acknowledge universities’ direction toward providing more online courses and note that having the opportunity for the instructor to make the choice is important. Similar to students, convenience and flexibility is the
largest factor that motivates instructors to teach online. Instructors are able to organize their own schedules and determine where they will complete their work. Additionally, instructors said that they teach online because it provides a way to reach more learners (Wright, 2014). Teaching online can provide a way to reach learners of different abilities and allow students to not stand out (Anderson, 2010). Interestingly, additional financial compensation was not a motivating factor for the majority of instructors interviewed (Wright, 2014).

**Defining Instructor Presence**

Instructors interviewed on their perceptions of instructor presence believe that instructor presence is one of the most vital factors of an online course (Richardson et al., 2016). The Community of Inquiry explains that instructor presence is comprised of many elements of course design, facilitation of discourse, and direct instruction. Course design includes selecting and developing course content, determining the structure of course or group activities, and providing expectations and policies for students. Direct instruction includes activities such as presenting or introducing course content, asking questions, providing feedback on assessments, and providing technical support. The facilitation of course discourse overlaps with direct instruction and includes prompting discussion, highlighting common threads among student responses, making announcements, hosting web-conferences, steering students back on track, and responding to student questions via discussion board, email, phone, etc. (Anderson et al., 2001; Garrison et al., 2000).

Building on the Community of Inquiry, two research studies have further categorized the elements of instructor presence. Hung and Chou's (2015) study of student perceptions of online and blended instructor roles provided five distinct categories of roles instructors play within a course. These include designing and organizing the course, facilitating discussion, serving as
technical support, providing social support and building relationships, and designing course assessments (Hung & Chou, 2015).

Richardson et al. (2015) identified five categories of instructor presence, which include Advocating, Facilitating, Sense Making, Organizing, and Maintaining. Advocating refers to providing support and additional guidance as needed for the students to be successful. Facilitating includes directions and communication. Sense Making includes clarifying concepts and providing constructive assessment feedback. Organizing refers to the course organization and materials. Maintaining includes the role of technical support and logistical support (Richardson et al., 2015).

Organizing

In developing their courses, many instructors are responsible for designing and organizing the course, which includes choosing or developing the instructional materials, activities, and assessments as well as determining the order and pacing of activities. This also includes the physical organization of things in the course learning management system. In other cases, the course is organized by another instructor rather than the instructor who will facilitate the course (Richardson et al., 2015).

The instructor’s responsibility for course design varies by school. Many schools employ instructional designers or design teams to work with faculty to develop online courses either on a required or optional basis. However, not all institutions provide this type of support (Legon & Garrett, 2017; Seaton & Schweir, 2014). Institutions with a larger number of online students (at least 7,500 students enrolled in at least one online course) are more likely to require instructors to partner with instructional designers or design teams than smaller programs. Fifty-one percent of surveyed institutions with large enrollment reported that they require their faculty to work
with instructional designers or teams to design their online course(s). Requiring instructors to collaborate with instructional designers on the design of their online course increased consistency in technology, consistency in pedagogy, and student engagement (Legon & Garrett, 2018).

Hung and Chou (2015) found that students highly value clear design and organization in an online course, more so than the other roles instructors hold. Hodges and Cowan (2012) found that ease of course navigation is a top priority for students. Students also value structure in terms of the schedule and due dates for the course (Bair & Bair, 2011). Communicating clear expectations for assignments, dates, and participation, grading assessments in a timely manner, and being responsive to students are highly valued (Hodges & Cowan, 2012; Hung & Chou, 2015; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010).

When asked to identify factors influencing the lack of success in online courses, a lack of clear instructions was among the factors most prevalent even though this was not one of the top factors identified as contributing to success (Kupczynski et al., 2010). This may indicate that even when students may not overtly notice the value of clear instructions when present, they do notice when instructions are not clear. Other students indicated that course organization is better in online learning management systems than in face-to-face courses (Paechter & Maier, 2010).

Facilitating

Some research in identifying students’ and instructors’ expectations and value of instructor presence has been conducted. Asynchronous discussion boards are a common method of communication in online courses and one of the areas of instructor presence used most often (Bair & Bair, 2015). However, many faculty are still unsure of the best way to manage discussion boards in online courses. In an effort to not stifle the students’ comments, some
instructors become more of a facilitator of the discussion than an active participant (Seaton & Schwier, 2014). Students noted the value of the instructor in guiding the discussion. Discussions can get off-track, and the instructor can clarify student misconceptions, steer the conversation back to the intended focus, and ask questions to further student thinking (Kupczynski et al., 2010).

**Sense Making**

In this role, instructors provide instructional material to help students learn course concepts. This can also include examples or demonstrations (Richardson et al., 2015). Providing clear explanations of course concepts and providing constructive feedback on course assessments is highly valued by students. In addition to their grade, students want to know what they did incorrectly. This feedback can then be incorporated in future assessments (Kupczynski et al., 2010). Clarifying student misconceptions is also a role students expect instructors to play in their courses (Bair & Bair, 2011).

**Advocating**

Another role held by instructors is that of encourager or advocate. Some instructors provide encouragement in the feedback of assessments by providing positive aspects of students’ work in addition to the areas that need to be improved (Richardson et al., 2016). As an advocate for students, instructors provide additional guidance or tips for being successful not only with class activities and assignments but also with their pursuit of professional goals (Richardson et al., 2015). Hung and Chou (2015) showed that students may not value this role and the instructors’ effort to build relationships with students as highly as any of the other roles instructors have in their courses.
Maintaining

Maintaining the course involves addressing various logistical issues. Instructors provide guidance on how to navigate the course site and access communication tools used in the course (Richardson et al., 2015). Making announcements to remind students of assessments or highlight something important are common in online courses (Bair & Bair, 2011; Richardson et al., 2016). Additionally, providing technical support is a function that students expect an online instructor to provide in their courses (Hung & Chou, 2015). Since some students are not familiar with the technology required in the online course, the instructor often serves in the role of providing that instruction (Bair & Bair, 2015; Richardson et al., 2015). Technology support is provided for students and faculty at varying levels (Anderson, 2010; Legon & Garrett, 2018) and instructors may fill that role in some cases (Anderson, 2010; Richardson et al., 2015).

Instructor Persona

An instructor persona is the version of the instructor that the instructor shares with students. Aspects of the instructor persona are revealed through the roles of instructor presence such as the personal information an instructor provides and how the instructor identifies themselves in the course in writing, images, audio, or video. This also includes how the instructor communicates with students. Instructors can be formal or informal in communication. They may respond quickly or take a long time to respond (Major, 2015).

Instructors may also differ in how harshly or encouragingly assessment feedback is presented. Sharing personal and professional information can help the students to see them both as a real person and as an expert in the content area. Instructors have noted that their actions show students how to interact in the course and can affect how likely students are to approach instructors (Richardson et al., 2016).
Richardson et al. (2015) found that while instructors provide all of these functions in teaching online courses, they do not all provide them in the same way or to the same degree. Some instructors focus on some elements more than others while some instructors attempt to dedicate the same amount of effort in each category (Richardson et al., 2015)

**Effects of Instructor Presence on Students**

Students have reported a greater sense of community and learning when instructors are more involved in the course facilitation and when the course is designed well (Shea, Swan, Li, & Pickett, 2005). The various roles in which instructors serve affect the students’ levels of engagement, satisfaction, and retention in online courses.

**Student Engagement**

Various elements of instructor presence have a positive effect on student engagement. Since instructors choose the tools, design the activities, and control their level of interaction in the online course, they directly influence the level of engagement the students have in the course. Ma et al. (2014) found that the more prepared instructors are, the more engaged students will be with the course materials. Additionally, students are more likely to complete course activities if instructors provide more guidance and feedback (Ma et al., 2014).

Instructors can design the course in a way that encourages interaction among the students (Armstrong, 2011; Lear et al., 2009). Undergraduate students in Tanner et al.’s (2006) study noted that collaboration with other students is important and that they would miss this aspect when taking an online course. This preference may differ among disciplines. In Tanner et al.’s study, students who were non-business students indicated a higher level of desire for student-student dialogue than business students. The majors of the non-business students were not specified and comparisons were not made within that group (Tanner et al., 2006). Further
research comparing specific disciplines would provide additional insight on differences of perception between disciplines.

Students are less engaged when instructors are absent from the course (Armstrong, 2011). Instructors have also noticed that a lack of involvement or responsive of the instructor may lead to a lack of engagement for the student. Instructors acknowledged that students seem to disconnect when they do not see that their instructor is an active participant in the course through communication, assessment feedback, etc. Other instructors noted that students follow their lead in terms of their level of involvement in online discussions. The more involved the instructor is, the more involved the student is in the discussion. Additionally, students may be more apt to reach out to the instructor if the instructor’s communication style is less formal (Richardson et al., 2016). Instructor presence can positively affect student engagement, and increased student engagement is positively correlated with the level of student satisfaction and perceived learning (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016).

**Student Satisfaction**

Teaching presence and cognitive presence are predictors of student satisfaction (Hosler & Arend, 2012). The value that students see in online learning can affect their satisfaction in the course (Sahin & Shelly, 2008). Conversely, the level at which students are satisfied with online courses is also positively correlated with their value or quality of online courses (Rodriguez, Ooms, & Montanez, 2008). Therefore, it is important to understand both what students value in online education and what affects their satisfaction with online courses.

Many aspects can affect a student’s satisfaction in a course including technical ability, value of online learning, communication, assessment feedback, etc. The instructor plays a role in each of these areas (Hung & Chou, 2015). In fact, the involvement of the instructor may be one
of the most important aspects affecting student satisfaction because the instructor is part of each of those aspects (Fedynich et al., 2015).

When asked which instructor behaviors are most important in an online course, undergraduate students in an education program indicated clear instructions, course design, instructor availability, and instructor responsiveness (Hodges & Cowan, 2012). Other students indicated that learning course content, the instructors’ level of expertise, and the ability to work with a qualified tutor contribute to their satisfaction with an online course (Paechter & Maier, 2010).

One benefit of taking an online course is the ability and flexibility for students and instructors to work on their own timetable and from any location. Some faculty find that students are not prepared to be self-disciplined and prefer a more structured schedule (Bair & Bair, 2011). The organization and structure of a course is positively correlated to satisfaction of the students in the course for both undergraduate and graduate students (Armstrong, 2011; Gray & DiLoreto, 2016; Paechter & Maier, 2010).

Communication seems to be one of the most researched predictors of student satisfaction. Perceiving flexibility in the ability and methods of communicating with the instructor and peers has been shown to be positively correlated to student satisfaction with online learning (Sahin & Shelley, 2008), and the instructor plays a role in each of these areas (Hung & Chou, 2015). Graduate students surveyed on their opinions of their experiences in online courses were satisfied with clear instructions and how different learning styles can be addressed with online learning but indicated a need for greater instructor feedback and opportunities for interaction (Fedynich et al., 2015). Undergraduate students also expressed the desire for clear instructions for accessing and completing course activities (Armstrong, 2011). While specific feedback helps
students, they become frustrated when feedback is not provided in a timely manner (Hosler & Arend, 2012). Additional research with undergraduate students would provide more insight on communication preferences of undergraduate online courses.

In an analysis of student satisfaction in online sections of a graduate leadership course, students specifically indicated that the instructor’s involvement in furthering the class discussions and hosting web-conferences were helpful. Students were also more favorable toward the course when the instructor’s comments in the discussions were more of a social nature and encouraging (Ladyshewsky, 2013). Students in universities in Austria indicated that interaction with other students contributes to their satisfaction in online courses (Paechter & Maier, 2010). Richardson et al. (2016) found that graduate students value the instructor guiding the class discussions.

A study on undergraduate public relations courses, however, showed that instructor presence was not significantly related to the students’ satisfaction of the course. Instructor presence in this study was based on announcements and discussion posts made to the whole class. Direct communication with individual students was not reviewed. Students were not asked to provide their perspectives on how the instructor’s involvement in the course affected their satisfaction in the online course (Moore, 2014).

By the nature of the course being online, a level of technical proficiency is needed to be successful. Technology can make for a richer student experience (Tanner et al., 2006). However, the level at which a student is comfortable using technology can directly affect their satisfaction in the course (Rodriguez et al., 2008; Sahin & Shelley 2008). Instructors often play the part of trainer or support for the technology used in their courses (Bair & Bair, 2015). Armstrong (2011) found that students determined satisfaction with technology based on how the technology was used.
used rather than the actual tools provided. Improper implementation can cause confusion for students rather than enhancing learning (Armstrong, 2011).

**Student Retention**

Instructor presence has been shown to affect student retention in online courses or programs. When asked which factors affect student retention in online courses, thirty-nine students, faculty, and administrators provided a variety of answers. Factors were rated based on importance by all three groups of participants. Then the top ten factors for each group were determined. Students identified flexibility/convenience and time management as the two most important factors (Stanford-Bowers, 2008).

Elements of instructor presence also in the top ten factors included clear requirements, technical support, design of the course, and discussion/interaction. Faculty listed clear requirements, interaction, and computer-related factors in the top ten. Administrators identified the top reason to be self-discipline and the second to be instructor responsiveness/feedback/interaction. While the number one reason reported by participants was student-related, many of the other factors were elements of instructor presence (Stanford-Bowers, 2008).

Some factors of instructor presence such as the instructor fostering course discussions and being responsive to students have been found to be predictive of student retention in undergraduate online programs (Boston et al., 2009). An instructor in Richardson et al.’s study (2016) explained that if students see instructors as real people, they will be more likely to come to them when they need help in the course.

Conversely, Moore (2014) found that completion of undergraduate public relations courses decreased as instructor presence, as measured by the number of announcements and
discussion board posts made to the whole class, increased. The research acknowledges that the high level of self-discipline among the successful students may contribute to their lack of need for instructor interaction or presence (Moore, 2014). The difference in the effect of instructor presence indicates that how much instructor presence is preferred by students in an online course should be studied. Additionally, communication to specific students through individual discussion replies, assessment feedback, email, etc. should be considered.

**Student Outcomes**

The level of instructor presence can affect student outcomes. Constructive and specific feedback on assessments throughout the course can be used by students to improve subsequent assessments. Students expressed the need for specific feedback. Knowing concrete ways that they need to improve their work guides them in deeper thinking about the concepts. Encouraging and nonjudgmental feedback made students feel more open to explore concepts further. However, when feedback is not provided in a timely manner, students become frustrated and stop learning at the same level (Hosler & Arend, 2012; Kupczynski et al., 2010).

Graduate and undergraduate students were asked about the factors that contribute to their ability to think critically about the course concepts. They identified several aspects of instructor presence. Discussing concepts in the course discussion board while the instructor was also participating were beneficial. Students appreciated the instructor providing insight, responding to various student posts, keeping the students focused on the topic at hand, and not judging student responses to the discussion questions (Hosler & Arend, 2012).

One instructor purposely increased her level of involvement in her online psychology course through an introductory email which included a short video, increased participation in the discussion boards, weekly announcements, and more personalized feedback in which she
attempted to connect course concepts to the students' personal experiences. She found that the grades for that semester were equal to those of her on-campus class and greater than those of her previous online course. Student perceptions of the changes in instructor presence were not explored (Kennette & Redd, 2015).

**Instructor Challenges in Providing Instructor Presence**

Research previously discussed shows that the presence or involvement of the instructor in an online course is valuable and affects student engagement, satisfaction, retention, and outcomes. However, there are some associated challenges faced by the instructors in teaching online. The most prevalent issues discussed in the research were related to time, technology, training, and quality.

**Time**

Instructors reported that teaching online takes more time than teaching a course face to face (Anderson, 2010; Seaton & Schwier, 2014; Wright, 2014). Instructors who are required to research as well as teach were less engaged and made more negative statements than those who chose to teach (Seaton & Schwier, 2014). Some instructors felt as though they were tied to their course all the time (Wright, 2014). Instructors who scheduled specific times to work on the course had more favorable perspectives (Seaton & Schwier, 2014).

The development of the course structure and content requires a lot of time prior to the course delivery (Anderson, 2010; Wright, 2014) since instructors need to provide written instructions for assessments, develop activities, and update instructional content (Anderson, 2010). Instructors concerned with academic integrity in online courses stated that they spend additional time creating more than one version of course assessments (Wright, 2014). During the semester, time is required to facilitate discussions and grade assessments.
Technology Issues

In online courses, instructors must learn how to use the technology of the learning management system and other technology in addition to being experts in their content area. Some instructors have instructional designers to help with learning how to best use technology in their courses while other instructors must learn on their own (Seaton & Schwier, 2014).

The level of access to technical support for faculty and students varies by institution as well (Anderson, 2010). Instructors often play a role of technical support for students. In some cases, students do not have previous knowledge of how to use the learning management system or other required technologies. Instructors must provide instruction on using these tools (Bair & Bair, 2011).

Bair and Bair (2011) noted that in their experiences, technology served to both connect and disconnect them from students in their online courses. While the online tools provided a method for students to discuss course content, they did not have the opportunity to connect with each other on a more social level as they would in the on-campus classroom (Bair & Bair, 2011). In one study, instructors indicated that they would miss interaction with students during class and in out of class meetings (Tanner et al., 2009). In another study, however, instructors found that discussions in the course actually helped to build relationships among students. Students and instructors in these courses arranged for in person social meetings (Anderson, 2010).

Instructors are affected by the lack of connection with students in determining understanding of material. In a case study with twelve instructors, it was noted that not having the visual cues that they would have during face-to-face classes made it more difficult or impossible for instructors to know if students understood the course material (Seaton & Schwier, 2014).
**Preparation and Support**

Instructors play a large role in designing their course in most cases, however, some instructors teach courses that were designed by someone else. Some instructors in this situation indicate that they felt limited in changes that could be made in the organization of the course. Others note that there are still opportunities to add their presence through introductory videos and communication (Richardson et al., 2016).

Of those institutions surveyed, 51% of institutions require their instructors to work with instructional designers or instructional design teams to design their online courses. While most institutions offer or require instructional design support, there are still many that do not. It is more likely for an instructor at an institution with a smaller or mid-sized online enrollment to be solely responsible for the design of their course than institutions with a larger online enrollment (Legon & Garrett, 2018).

Institutions choosing not to mandate instructional design collaborations cite the need to preserve the instructors’ academic freedom and financial considerations as the main reasons for this decision. Another financial consideration facing institutions is whether or not to compensate instructors for designing the courses. Some instructors are compensated for online course design while many are not. The practice of instructor compensation for course design varies greatly among institutions, but is more likely to occur at institutions with larger online enrollment (Legon & Garrett, 2018).

It is common for instructors of on campus courses to learn how to teach by the example provided to them while they were students. However, if instructors have not previously taken an online course, they do not have this experience to reference. Some instructors enjoy exploring technologies on their own. However, some noted that seeing an example of another instructor's
course was not as helpful without guidance on what they should be incorporating from the example into their own courses (Schmidt, Tschida, & Hodge, 2016).

Instructors noted that technologists rather than teachers provided most of the educational training they received during their graduate programs. In their careers, professional development sessions usually focus more on the use of technology than on pedagogy or course design. School provided training was more likely to have a balance in topics, and small group training allowed them to ask questions in a less intimidating atmosphere than a large training session. Informal discussions with colleagues, emails, or short training sessions in faculty meetings were helpful in learning tips that could be easily implemented. One faculty member noted the benefit of having multiple notices or methods of training. Seeing something multiple times made her feel like it was something she needed to acknowledge (Schmidt et al., 2016).

Quality

Some instructors perceive online course and student work in online courses as being of lower quality than on campus courses. However, one faculty member noted it may be more accurate to say there is a good or bad instructor which can be issue online and on-campus (Wright, 2014). Some students have noted that the lack of instructor interaction and direct instruction make the online courses seem to be of lower quality than their on campus classes (Armstrong, 2011).

Comparing Student and Instructor Perspectives

While most research on online learning is conducted through the lens of either the instructor or the students, there have been some studies which explored both perspectives of various elements of online learning (Seok, DaCosta, Kinsell, & Tung, 2010; Tanner et al., 2009). The majority of these studies were quantitative in nature. Interviews or other qualitative studies
can expand the understanding of how instructors experience instructor presence and the challenges they face.

Online Learning

Tanner et al. (2009) compared the perceptions of online learning of business students at two universities with those of business instructors from those same two business schools as well as business schools across the country. This was a comparison of online learning as a whole rather than a comparison of their perceptions of specific courses. Less than one-fourth of the students and less than one-third of the faculty had previous online course experience. From their survey results, they found that students had a greater appreciation than faculty for the flexible nature of online courses and not having to attend class. Instructors, however, did not like the lack of structured face-to-face class time. Instructors also valued other face-to-face interaction such as out of class meetings more than the students (Tanner et al., 2009).

Both instructors and students agreed that lectures and level of faculty interaction are greater in face-to-face courses and that the textbook is more valuable in online courses than face to face courses. Faculty had a slightly higher agreement that students teach themselves material in the online course, although students indicated a higher level of agreement that online students must be self-disciplined (Tanner et al., 2009).

Effectiveness of Online Learning

Instructors and students at a community college were surveyed for their perspectives of the effectiveness of online courses (Seok et al., 2010). The researchers found that there was a difference based on gender (for both students and instructors) with females rating online courses as more effective than males. This was the case for several elements including instructional design and communication. While instructors had higher perceptions of the effectiveness of
communication, content, and management of the course, both students and instructors indicated that online courses are effective. However, instructors who have more online teaching experience have a higher perception of the effectiveness of online learning (Seok et al., 2010).

**Summary**

Previous research has shown that online education is widely experienced in higher education and growing. Seaton and Schwier (2014) noted a lack of research on the instructor experience in online courses. The role of instructor presence and its effects on students continue to be investigated by higher education researchers from student perspectives, instructor perspectives, in various levels of education, and in various disciplines. Researchers have found that instructors hold many roles in an online course including those of designer, communicator, facilitator, technical support, and supporter (Bair, 2011; Hung & Chou, 2015; Richardson et al., 2015). Qualitative research can provide a better understanding of how instructors and students perceive the instructors’ roles in online courses and how the way they implement those roles affects students.

Studies have also shown that presence and actions of the instructor have an influence on the students’ satisfaction (Armstrong, 2011; Fedynich et al., 2015; Hodges & Cowan, 2012; Hosler & Arend, 2012; Hung & Chou, 2015; Paechter & Maier, 2010; Sahin & Shelley, 2008), engagement (Armstrong, 2011; Gray & DiLoreto, 2016; Ma et al., 2014; Richardson et al., 2016), outcomes (Hosler & Arend, 2012; Kennette & Redd, 2015; Kupczynski et al., 2010), and retention (Boston et al., 2009; Moore, 2014; Richardson et al., 2016; Stanford-Bowers, 2008) in online courses. Due to the quantitative nature of the majority of these studies, qualitative research allowing students to explain how factors of instructor presence affects them can be valuable in adding to the understanding of the student experience in online courses.
Instructors face challenges in teaching and being present in online courses. The main challenges discussed in research include the amount of time required in developing and teaching online courses (Anderson, 2010; Seaton & Schwier, 2014; Wright, 2014) and problems with technology (Anderson, 2010; Bair & Bair, 2011; Seaton & Schwier, 2014). Instructors also indicated that technology can be a barrier in knowing students understand the material (Seaton & Schwier, 2014). Other challenges discussed are learning how to be present in courses designed by another instructor (Richardson et al., 2016), and lack of guidance on preparing a course of their own (Schmidt et al., 2016).

Many studies that have been conducted regarding perceptions of teaching presence and experience with online courses have utilized quantitative methods (Ma et al., 2014; Paechter & Maier, 2010; Stanford-Bowers, 2008; Tanner et al., 2009). Those using mixed-methods usually included only a few open-ended questions (Hosler & Arend, 2012; Ladyshewsky, 2013; Lear et al., 2009; Kupczynski et al., 2010). There have been very few purely qualitative case studies regarding instructor presence (Armstrong, 2011; Kennette & Redd, 2015). Therefore, additional qualitative studies are needed to provide a clearer understanding of instructor and student perspectives of instructor presence in online courses.

Many of these studies were conducted at single universities, within a single major or degree program, from one perspective (either student or instructor), or a specific geographical location (Ladyshewsky, 2013; Moore, 2014; Richardson et al. 2016; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010; Tanner et al., 2006). Studies that provide both the instructor and student perspectives in a variety of disciplines are needed to support or contradict findings from these research studies.

Further research at other universities and in other programs could be beneficial in supporting, challenging, and furthering the research on instructor presence in online courses. The
types of instructor presence students and instructors experience in online courses should be researched to better understand the current state of instructor presence, how instructor presence practices affect students, and the gaps between the students’ and instructors’ experiences and perceptions of instructor presence. One way this can be researched is through studying the instructor and student perceptions of instructor presence in the same school or even in the same courses.
CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and compare student and instructor perspectives of instructor presence in online undergraduate courses in various schools within a public research university. The information gathered from this study provides insight into what students have experienced and value in terms of instructor presence, what instructors are currently doing in online courses, what instructors see as beneficial to online students, and the challenges instructors face in providing instructor presence in online courses. This study also provided the opportunity to discover similarities and differences between the instructor and student perceptions of these factors. Qualitative data regarding the students’ and faculty members’ experiences with instructor presence in online courses were collected using student and instructor individual interviews and student survey results.

Previous research on instructor presence usually occurred at a single university, within a single major or degree program, from one perspective (either student or instructor), or in a specific geographical location (Ladyshewsky, 2013; Moore, 2014; Richardson et al. 2016; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010; Tanner et al., 2006). Quantitative methods were used in most of the studies the researcher reviewed on perceptions of teaching presence (Ma et al., 2014; Paechter & Maier, 2010; Stanford-Bowers, 2008; Tanner et al., 2009) and of the studies conducted with mixed-methods, only a few open-ended questions were included (Hosler & Arend, 2012; Ladyshewsky, 2013; Lear et al., 2009; Kupczynski et al., 2010). Due to the limited number of
qualitative studies found on instructor presence in higher education online courses (Armstrong, 2011; Kennette & Redd, 2015), qualitative methods were chosen for this research study.

There are few studies that explored both the instructor and student perspectives. One quantitative study compared perceptions of students in two undergraduate business-specific schools with instructors from across the country and focused on one discipline (Tanner et al., 2009). This current study has a more direct comparison in that students in the courses taught by the instructor participants were interviewed. This allows a comparison of the student and instructor perspectives on instructor presence in the same online undergraduate courses. The current study also provides perspectives in other undergraduate disciplines in addition to business.

Qualitative research methods are used to gain holistic insight of a condition or experience through interpreting the participants’ reflections or descriptions of their experiences (Creswell, 2013). There are many different types of qualitative research. When exploring the experiences or of participants in a specific course or courses, it is appropriate to employ qualitative case study methods (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). To gain rich, descriptive data for the current study, instructors and students who have experienced online courses participated in interviews or qualitative surveys. This study is a descriptive or pragmatic research study, which typically involves collecting data from multiple sources to provide a description of the case and participants’ experiences (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Instructor interviews, student interviews and qualitative surveys, and end-of-course student evaluation (IDEA survey) comments were analyzed to provide a description of student and instructor perspectives of instructor presence in online courses. As is characteristic with case studies, themes and conclusions were drawn from the data and conclusions are discussed (Creswell, 2013).
Research Questions

The overarching research question explored in this research study is: *What are students’ and instructors’ perceptions of instructor presence in online courses?*

Additional subquestions include

1. What are students’ experiences of instructor presence in online courses?
2. What are instructors’ experiences of instructor presence in online courses?
3. What are the similarities and differences between student and instructor experiences of instructor presence in online courses?
4. How do students perceive factors of instructor presence affecting their online course experience?
5. How do instructors perceive factors of instructor presence affecting the students’ online course experience?
6. What are similarities and differences between the instructor and student perceptions on how instructor presence affects the students’ experience in online courses?
7. How do instructors of different disciplines perceive instructor presence?
8. How do students in different disciplines perceive instructor presence?

Setting

In qualitative research, the study is usually conducted in a place determined as the natural setting for the participants (Creswell, 2013). For a study on instructors and students, a university is a natural setting. This study took place at a public research university in the Southeastern United States that is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The university entered into an agreement with the National Council for State Authorization
Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) in 2016 to become a SARA institution indicating the ability to market, recruit, and offer online courses to students in other SARA states.

The university offers both on-campus and online courses and programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Students can choose to take online courses exclusively or as part of a traditional degree. There are 11 bachelor degrees, 23 graduate degrees, and a number of minors, certificates, and professional studies courses offered by the university.

There were over 19,000 students enrolled at the university as of Fall 2016 with over 12,000 of those students enrolled in undergraduate courses according to the university’s Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Analysis (2017). In Fall 2017, there were over 20,000 total students, including over 13,000 undergraduate students. The majority of these students enrolled as full-time students (Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Analysis, 2018). Online enrollment has been steadily increasing since 2004 when there were a little over 1200 undergraduate students who had taken at least one online course and only 267 students who were taking only online courses. In the Fall 2016 semester, over 10,000 students, or about 52.7% of students, had taken at least one online course. Of those students, over 4,000, or about 22.7% of the total students, were enrolled in online courses exclusively.

Over 2,600 faculty members were employed with the university as of Fall 2017. This includes faculty at the graduate and undergraduate levels. This also includes both full-time and part-time faculty, however, the majority of faculty are full-time employees. Not all faculty members or instructors who are employed teach online. Faculty may teach on campus, online, or a combination of on-campus and online courses. It is not required for instructors to facilitate their online courses from their campus office. Some adjunct instructors do not have their own office on campus.
Faculty members have multiple types of teaching support. Technical support is provided by a central office, and some schools employee school-specific information technologists. Support for instructional design and technology integration is provided by a central office. In some schools, instructional design assistance is provided by school-specific instructional designers. The central office for online learning and the university’s teaching and learning center provide frequent training for instructors and staff members to learn about teaching strategies, new technologies, technology integration, and best practices for teaching online and on campus. Additionally, technical support for the learning management system is provided for students and instructors by the learning management system’s technical support office.

**Researcher Positionality**

Since the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection in qualitative research, it is necessary for the researcher to acknowledge how their experiences may influence their interpretation of the data collected during a research study (Creswell, 2013). As the researcher in this study, I have a Bachelor of Science in Psychology and a Master of Arts in Education in Elementary and Early Childhood Education. I have taught undergraduate online courses for the university offering my doctoral program. I have taught online professional development courses and in-person professional development workshops for the university in the case study.

I am an instructional designer in the university online learning office of the university in the study and was previously an instructional designer in the business school. In the role of instructional designer, I work with instructors to design, develop, and improve online courses. I have not taught any of the courses that are part of the case study. In daily practice, I do not interact directly with students. I serve as one of the Quality Matters Coordinators for the
university. I coordinate formal and informal Quality Matters reviews and facilitate sessions of the on-campus Applying the Quality Matters Rubric workshop.

I was drawn to the topic of instructor presence through my experiences as an instructional designer and as an online instructor. In working with faculty during course design and throughout the semester of delivery, questions often arise about how instructors should communicate with students. Sometimes during or at the end of development, faculty ask what they should do during the semester if the course is already built. We discuss their role in interacting with the students in discussions, answering questions, and providing feedback rather than in providing direct instruction through lectures as they would do during the delivery of an on-campus course.

I have also received questions from instructors who teach courses that are already built on how they can bring more of themselves into the course. When I worked within a specific school, I saw student survey feedback and feedback to advisors or department chairs that indicated that some faculty were not responsive or present in the course. Some students wondered what the instructor was supposed to be doing or why they had not heard from the instructor. Other students noted that assessment feedback was either not provided or was provided later than needed for them to actually use the feedback on the subsequent assessment.

In the role of instructional designer in a specific school, I also facilitated an online training course. The students in that course were instructors who were new to online teaching. Some instructors had never taught before at all. While this was a self-paced course, I found that participants still needed constructive feedback and timely communication with me. Some reached out for feedback and others responded positively when I provided feedback or checked in to see how they were progressing.
As an online instructor for another university, I taught courses developed by other instructors. In these courses, I added value through an introductory video, clarifying some instructions as needed, sending announcements with clarifications or reminders, responding to emails and text messages, and providing specific and constructive feedback. In this role, I experienced some challenges including technical issues, needing to provide technical support, setting aside enough time to provide helpful feedback on assessments, and responding to email and other communications in a timely manner.

Through the roles of instructional designer, trainer, and online instructor, I saw that there was a need to clarify the instructor’s role in online courses and the level of instructor interaction expected and needed by students. I also saw that it was important for the instructors to know how students’ experiences in courses affected their performance and satisfaction in the courses as well as for administrators to know how students and instructors experienced online courses and how courses could be improved to provide a better experience for all involved.

In the student and instructor interviews for this study, I used neutral tones and wording of questions to elicit truthful responses and hide any personal bias toward specific instructional practices. I strived to remain neutral in my facial expressions and body language as well. I did not attempt to correct or explain anything that I saw as a misunderstanding from an instructor or student as that would have altered the telling of their experience.

During data analysis, I protected against bias by adhering to the information provided by the participant rather than what I may have thought happened in the course. I strove to remain neutral between the instructor and the students. I took both sides as truth as it was truly their experience of the course. In the results section, I presented both positive and negative feedback for each course as reported by the participants.
Participants

The participants chosen for this study were students and instructors in a public research university in the Southeastern United States. Since the population was too great to interview all who are affected, sampling of participants was appropriate (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). To gain insight from instructors and students who had experienced the topic under review, purposive sampling was employed. Purposive sampling is used in cases where participants must have specific characteristics or experiences (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Since the research topic was instructor presence in online courses, it was appropriate for participants to include students and instructors who had experience taking and teaching online courses.

This study focused on undergraduate courses because the number of undergraduate students in online courses far exceeds the number of graduate students in online courses at this university and nationally. Allen and Seaman (2017) found that about 90% of distance students at public universities are undergraduate students. Since this percentage was so high, it was reasonable to include undergraduate students and instructors as the participants in this study.

There have been some previous studies on students’ perceptions of instructor presence. Some of these studied graduate or community college students (Fedynich et al., 2015; Ladyshewsky, 2013; Richardson et al., 2016; Seok et al., 2010). The majority of the studies that focused on undergraduate courses were quantitative in nature (Ma et al., 2014; Paechter & Maier, 2010; Stanford-Bowers, 2008; Tanner et al., 2009) or used mixed-methods with just a few open-ended questions (Hosler & Arend, 2012; Ladyshewsky, 2013; Lear et al., 2009; Kupczynski et al., 2010). Additionally, many of the studies only looked at one particular school or major (Hodges & Cowan, 2012; Kennette & Redd, 2015; Moore, 2014; Tanner et al., 2006).
There were 4.9 million undergraduate students who took at least one online course in 2015 (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Since such a large number of undergraduate students are affected by the state of online courses, it was important to gain a full picture of their experiences. The current study allowed students to express their thoughts and experiences in their own words, which may help researchers, instructors, staff, and administrators to better understand how aspects of instructor presence are perceived by students. With the large number of students taking online courses, there is a large number of instructors who teach online courses. This study allowed instructors to share in their own words their experiences and challenges with teaching online as well as how they perceived their actions affected students. Their experiences were then compared with the students’ experiences in their online course. Then, the instructor experience across courses was compared to the student experience across courses in the study. The only study that was found comparing student and instructor perspectives of online courses was at the undergraduate level in a business school. Their experiences were then compared with those of faculty at other schools across the country rather than within their own school. One goal of this study was to provide a direct comparison between instructors and students of the same courses and to include multiple disciplines.

While Webb (2016) and Savin-Baden and Major (2013) indicated that the quality of research is more important than the number of participants, data saturation should be reached. Data saturation is the point at which the data no longer present new information (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The number of participants needed to reach data saturation may vary in different types of research. Webb noted that 12 is a common number of participants in qualitative case studies. This practice was also employed in the multi-case studies on instructor presence by Seaton and Schwier (2014) and Richardson et al. (2015).
For pragmatic case studies specifically, Savin-Baden and Major (2013) noted that it is typical for studies to include around 30 interviews (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The current study was designed to include participants in individual interviews and focus groups. Focus groups should ideally consist of 6 to 12 participants (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). For each course studied, one instructor interview and one student focus group session was planned; however, due to a lack of participation in the focus groups, individual student interviews were conducted instead. To reach the recommended 30 interviews, the optimal number of courses to study was 8 to 10 courses. The end-of-course student survey (IDEA survey) comments for each course were also analyzed, if provided by the instructor. The IDEA survey is the standard survey implemented by the university at the end of each semester. Only the student comments were requested for this study. The length and number of comments in the IDEA survey results varied based on the number of students who completed the IDEA survey for each course.

**IRB Approval for Research**

Prior to data collection, International Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from two university IRB offices. The researcher was enrolled in a doctoral program at University A, and was employed at University B. The research was conducted at University B. Therefore, IRB approval was needed from both university IRB offices.

The researcher emailed a member of the administration in each school or college that offers undergraduate degree programs at University B to request permission to include that school or college in the research study. Administrators at four schools provided signed letters of permission to recruit instructors and students within their school for the research study, pending IRB approval. IRB approval was granted by the IRB at both universities involved (see Appendices A and B).
Due to lack of participation in the student focus groups, a change in student data collections methods was needed. IRB Amendments were submitted and approved by the IRB at both universities (see Appendices C and D). Renewal was requested and granted from University A (see Appendix E). Renewal from University B was not required since University B had labeled the study Exempt.

Instrumentation

As in most qualitative studies, the researcher was the primary instrument for data collection, and data were collected in multiple ways (Creswell, 2013). Data on instructor presence in online courses were collected from four sources: instructor interviews, student interviews, a qualitative online survey, and document analysis of student course surveys administered by IDEA, which is a third-party, non-profit student survey company, IDEA. On the form used to sign up for the research study, demographic data were requested. Student demographic questions included age, year in school, major, and number of online courses previously taken. Faculty demographic questions included faculty status (tenure, full, associate, adjunct), number of online courses taught, total years of teaching experience, and number of online courses taken as a student.

Instructor Interviews

Each instructor participated in an in-person interview. Interview questions were open-ended. The questions included an introductory request for the instructor to talk about their experience in the specified course followed by questions based on the elements of instructor presence as outlined by the Richardson et al. (2015) and commonly researched factors presented in the literature review. Faculty were also asked about challenges in designing for or providing
instructor presence as well as how they thought their presence affected the students’ experiences in the course (see Appendix F).

**Student Interview and Surveys**

The researcher intended to conduct student focus groups; however, due to a lack of participation in the focus groups, students were given the option to participate in individual interviews by phone or web conference or to complete an online survey. The focus group questions (see Appendix G) were slightly altered to better fit the new method options of individual interview or qualitative survey (see Appendix H). The qualitative survey was administered using the online survey software, Qualtrics.

**Student IDEA Surveys**

During the last week of each semester, students are provided with links in the learning management system to the student opinion surveys that are administered by IDEA. In addition to Likert-type scale questions, the survey contains open-ended questions to allow students to provide qualitative feedback on their course experience. If provided access by the schools or instructor, the qualitative feedback on the IDEA surveys for the courses under investigation were analyzed. Reviewing these data provided insight on student reactions to the course during the last week of the course and may have come from students who did not otherwise provide feedback during this research study. The feedback provided in the IDEA survey is anonymous and cannot be traced back to a specific student.

**Instrumentation Validity**

The instructor and student questions were validated for content. The questions were drafted based on content from the literature review and the theoretical framework. The researcher has experience teaching online and as an online student. Additionally, an instructor who has been
teaching online for several years reviewed the initial questions for instructor interviews. The student questions were originally written as focus group questions. An undergraduate student who has taken many online courses reviewed the initial questions for student focus groups. Both the instructor and the student confirmed that these questions were appropriate for this study. The IDEA survey is administered through a third-party company (IDEA), and questions were not altered by the researcher.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in this study was achieved through a variety of methods. Triangulation was achieved by using multiple methods of data collection (Creswell, 2013) including instructor interviews, the research survey developed by the researcher, and the IDEA end-of-course surveys, which are used each semester by the university. The IDEA survey was not developed for this study and is used for all courses at the university. Any online-specific questions are given to all online courses at the university. The IDEA survey was administered as normal at the end of the semester. The comments were then provided to the researcher by the instructor.

The interview questions and research survey developed by the researcher were based on the framework and the categories on instructor presence as defined by Richardson et al. (2015). These were reviewed by an online student, an online instructor, and the five members of the researcher’s dissertation committee.

**Data Collection**

**Participant Recruitment—Administration**

The Associate Deans for each school at the university were emailed a letter requesting permission to email the instructors in that school to request participation in the study. This letter
included the description and parameters of the study. Associate Deans from four schools agreed to allow recruitment of participants from their school.

Once IRB approval letters were received from both universities involved in the research study, a member of the administration of each of the four schools who had previously granted site permission was emailed. This email included the notification that the research study was granted IRB approval from both universities and requested that the administrator either forward the participation request email to the instructors in their school or to provide the researcher with an email list so that the researcher could email the instructors.

**Participant Recruitment—Instructors**

Three Associate Deans forwarded the participation request email to the instructors in their school, and one Associate Dean provided access for the researcher to send the email to the instructors through a school mailing list. Two administrators sent the email only to the instructors in their school who taught online courses since the other instructors would not have been eligible to participate. In two schools, the full instructor distribution list was emailed, and instructors self-identified as eligible to participate in the study.

The email each instructor received included a description of the study, requirements for participating in the study for both the instructor and students, and a link to the IRB-approved informed consent letter in Qualtrics. Instructors who volunteered to participate completed the informed consent form through the Qualtrics survey system. In the Qualtrics survey, instructors provided the course to be studied, demographic information, and their date and time availability for the individual interview. Only the researcher had access to this information. Participation was voluntary and confidential. Instructors were allowed to leave or stop the interview at any point. Participant names and interview data are only available to the researcher. The instructor
participants received a follow-up email to schedule the individual interview and instructions for sending the recruitment email to the students in their Fall 2017 online course.

**Participant Recruitment—Students**

The instructors who agreed to participate indicated an online course they taught in Fall 2017 to be studied. The researcher provided the instructor an email to send to all of the students who were enrolled in that course. This allowed the students the opportunity to reach out to the researcher and avoided having the instructor provide student contact information to someone outside of the course. The email to the students included a description of the study, the requirements of the study, the date and time of the focus group for their course, and a link to the online participation form and informed consent letter. Students who volunteered completed the informed consent form through Qualtrics. All Qualtrics survey responses are private and confidential. Only the researcher has access to this information. Participation was voluntary and confidential. Students were able to leave questions unanswered or leave the survey at any time.

Instructors sent the recruitment email to the students in their selected course to request participation in one student focus group for the course. About 2 weeks later, the instructors re-sent the recruitment email to the students. Out of 10 courses, there were a total of two students—one in each of two courses—who volunteered to participate in focus groups on campus. Due to the lack of response, another strategy was needed. The researcher gained approval from the IRB of both universities to offer the students other options for participation. The researcher emailed the updated recruitment email to the instructors who sent them to their students. The new email explained that students who would be willing to participate could choose to participate in a phone interview, a web-conference interview, or complete a qualitative survey online through the Qualtrics survey software. Instructors re-sent the recruitment email about 2 weeks later.
**Participation.** Table 3 provides a summary of participation in all methods of data collection for this study.

Table 3

*Data Collection Methods*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructor Interviews</td>
<td>10 individual interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Interviews</td>
<td>1 interview by phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document Analysis: Student Research Surveys</td>
<td>8 surveys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document Analysis: IDEA Comments</td>
<td>126 total comments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Instructor Interviews**

Ten instructors volunteered to participate in the study, which included participating in one individual interview and forwarding the student participation request email to the students in their course to be studied. Nine of the 10 instructors also provided the comments from their IDEA surveys. These instructors represented two schools at the university—Business and Health Professions. Additional faculty from these two schools expressed interest in the study but were unable to participate since their classes were either not taught fully online or not taught during the Fall 2017 semester.

Individual instructor interviews lasted an average of 1 hour each and were conducted in the instructor’s campus office. The researcher took notes during each interview. All 10 instructors provided verbal permission for the interview to be audio-recorded. The interview recordings were then transcribed. Audio-recordings and transcripts are only accessible by the researcher.
**Student Interview and Surveys**

Nine students chose to participate in the research study survey by phone or online survey. One student participated in a phone interview with the researcher. The phone interview lasted approximately 1 hour. With verbal permission of the student, the interview was recorded. The researcher also took notes during the interview.

Eight students participated in the qualitative surveys. Students had the option to leave the survey at any point, so all surveys that included at least one answer beyond the demographic information were included. For five courses, at least one student participated in the qualitative survey. There were five courses where no students volunteered to participate in the survey or interview.

**IDEA Survey Comments**

The IDEA survey instructions were emailed to all students by IDEA during the last week of the 2017 semester as part of normal course activity, and surveys for all online courses included online specific questions. Students completed the surveys online and voluntarily. The surveys were completely anonymous and did not contain any student identifying information. Survey results for the courses in the study were provided by the 9 of the 10 instructors. The number of comments per course ranged from 6 to 30. There was a total of 126 comments.

Including the student research surveys, phone interview, and IDEA surveys, student data were gathered for 9 of the 10 courses in the research study. The number of students who contributed to each data source can be seen in Table 4.
Table 4

Student Participation by Course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Phone Interview</th>
<th>Research Survey</th>
<th>IDEA Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Security

Electronic records of interview transcripts, IDEA survey results, and recordings are stored on the researcher’s personal computer. The computer requires a password to login and is stored in the researcher’s home. Hard copies of IDEA survey results provided by instructors and interview notes are stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home. Three years after the closing of the study, the electronic records will be deleted from the researcher’s computer, the paper records will be shredded, and the consent forms will be deleted from Qualtrics. When presenting the data in Chapter IV, no names or identifying information are included. When providing quotes or details of experiences, names of instructors and students are not provided.
Data Analysis

Qualitative methods for data analysis were used to analyze the instructor interviews, student interviews, student research surveys, and student IDEA survey responses. Interview conversations were recorded and transcribed. The researcher also took written notes during the interviews. The student research surveys were completed online, and the responses are in text form. Qualitative responses on the IDEA surveys were in text format already.

Multiple rounds of coding are often used in analyzing qualitative data (Saldana, 2016). Data from all sources were reviewed and analyzed using three different types of coding. This study utilized three types of coding for analyzing the student and instructor data.

The first round of analysis utilized holistic coding. Holistic coding was used to review responses from individuals as a whole to better understand their full experience (Creswell, 2013; Saldana, 2016). The researcher read each source of transcript, research survey, and IDEA survey responses individually. For each source, broad findings or codes were noted. The researcher often read the sources multiple times to update or combine codes as appropriate. This round of coding gave the researcher a big picture view of each participant's experience and highlighted some perceived effects of various factors of instructor presence. Then, the researcher reviewed documents using the In Vivo method. This involved reading each document line by line. Words, phrases, or sentences that vividly captured the participant’s experience were noted. As recommended by Cresswell (2013) and Saldana (2015), this round of coding was repeated to thoroughly analyze the content.

In the third round of analysis, the researcher read through the analysis from rounds 1 and 2. As described by Saldana (2016), through concept coding, codes from the previous rounds of analysis were combined into specific concepts to be discussed. The researcher sorted the codes
from the first two rounds into categories, and from those categories, concepts were developed. After coding was completed for each student data source, the concepts from the student interviews, research surveys, and IDEA feedback were combined to provide a more comprehensive view of the students’ experience in regard to instructor presence than the researcher would have had when looking at each source individually. The instructor interviews were coded separately using the same three-step coding method as was used to analyze the student data.

After each source was analyzed, findings from students and instructors in the same course were compared and summarized. Similarities and differences in perspectives of instructor presence were noted. Then, cross-case analysis occurred. The feedback from students was compared across courses to find similarities and differences. Data from the student perspective across courses were combined to develop a cross-case summary of the students’ perspectives of online courses. The data from instructor interviews were also compared across courses, and a summary of the instructors’ perspectives was developed. The student and instructor summaries were compared, and differences and similarities were identified.

Conclusions drawn from the data analysis are explored in Chapter IV. Findings from this study may be used by higher education administrators, instructors, and instructional designers to improve instructor training, instructor practices, course design, and the overall online learning experience for students and instructors. Ideas for future research in the areas of online learning and instructor presence be discussed following the conclusions.

Summary

Chapter III described the university and schools where the study took place as well as the student and instructor participants. The instrumentation and case study methods for collecting
and analyzing data are outlined. Qualitative data were collected through open-ended questions in one-on-one interviews with instructors, a student phone interview, and student online research surveys with those who participated in online courses in the Fall 2017 semester.

Additionally, document analysis of previously administered student opinion surveys (IDEA surveys) was incorporated. Data were analyzed using multiple qualitative coding methods by the researcher to identify differences and similarities between and within the student and instructor responses. Similarities, differences, and themes drawn from the results are discussed in Chapter IV. Conclusions drawn from the research, implications on future practice, and recommendations for research are explored in Chapter V.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of students and instructors in online courses. Data were collected through individual instructor and student interviews, student surveys developed by the researcher, and student end-of-course (IDEA) surveys at a research university in the Southeast to gain a better understanding of how students and instructors experience and perceive instructor presence in online courses. Instructor presence includes many factors such as course design, development of course materials and activities, assessment design and feedback, and communication with students. Findings from the data from each course as well as common themes are presented in this chapter. Findings and conclusions are further discussed based on each research question in Chapter V.

Participant Demographics

Instructor Demographics

Ten faculty members participated in the study, which included an in-person interview and forwarding recruitment emails to their students. The demographics for the instructor participants were reviewed. To protect the anonymity of the instructors, demographics are not presented by course. There was an equal number of male and female participants. Participants held varying titles from Adjunct Instructor to Professor. There were participants who had 3 or fewer years of teaching and some who had several years of teaching. Five participants had been teaching for more than 15 years. Some instructors had a few years of experience teaching online while others
had at least 8 years of experience in online courses. Six of the 10 instructors had taken at least one online course. Four instructors indicated they had taken two to four courses online.

**Student Demographics**

There were three methods of data collection from students which included a one-on-one interview, a qualitative survey developed by the researcher, and the course IDEA survey. Students completed the IDEA survey at the end of the semester as a normal part of the course. This was prior to the research study, so the researcher had no influence on the questions included in the survey. The IDEA survey did not provide student demographic information.

The demographic information for students who participated in the interview and research survey are shown in Table 5. Only one respondent was male. While there were respondents in multiple age groups, most held either Junior or Senior class standing. The number of classes students had previously taken online varied as well. All students had taken at least two online courses while some students had taken more than 10 courses online.

Table 5  

**Student Interview and Survey Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Class Standing</th>
<th>Online Classes Taken</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>more than 10</td>
<td>survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>more than 10</td>
<td>survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>2-4</td>
<td>phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>2-4</td>
<td>survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>8-10</td>
<td>survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>8-10</td>
<td>survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>more than 10</td>
<td>survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>5-7</td>
<td>survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>8-10</td>
<td>survey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Questions

The overarching research question explored in this research study is: *What are students’ and instructors’ perceptions of instructor presence in online courses?*

Additional subquestions questions include:

1. What are students’ experiences of instructor presence in online courses?
2. What are instructors’ experiences of instructor presence in online courses?
3. What are the similarities and differences between student and instructor experiences of instructor presence in online courses?
4. How do students perceive factors of instructor presence affecting their online course experience?
5. How do instructors perceive factors of instructor presence affecting the students’ online course experience?
6. What are similarities and differences between the instructor and student perceptions on how instructor presence affects the students’ experience in online courses?
7. How do instructors of different disciplines perceive instructor presence?
8. How do students in different disciplines perceive instructor presence?

Course Summaries

Ten courses were explored in this study. These included both lower-level and upper-level undergraduate courses. Lower-level courses are those at the 100 and 200 level. Upper-level courses are those at the 300 and 400 level. While it is traditional for freshman and sophomores to take lower-level courses and juniors and seniors to take upper-level courses, that may not be the case for these courses. Below are summaries of each course from the student and instructor points of view, followed by a comparison of the perspectives.
Course 1: Student Perspective

Course 1 was an upper-level business course. There were 16 comments from students on the IDEA surveys at the conclusion of the Fall 2017 semester. Students’ comments regarded difficulties in working in teams, choice of instructional materials, and inconsistencies in grading. There were mixed reviews on the instructor’s feedback practices and course organization.

Students worked in teams on case studies. There were a couple of comments from students who stated that the lack of contribution from team members negatively affected their grades. One student noted that they could choose to not include non-performing team members on the submission, but they had difficulty navigating the social ramifications in implementing this. Another student suggested having a way to assign partial credit for team members who contributed but then suffered because the team member responsible for submitting the assignment failed to submit on time.

The instructor provided lecture videos and hosted meetings. It seemed to students that he was reading the PowerPoint and assignment questions and repeating information previously provided in the lecture. They did not find the lectures or meetings to be helpful. Students reported a lack of clarity in instructions and grading. Several students said that instructions on the assignments were not clear. They cited the concepts, vague case study questions, method to upload the presentation video, and the research paper as points of confusion. They would have liked examples and more recent cases.

Several students noted inconsistencies in grading. One student was unsure as to why points were deducted from his assignment and remained confused after asking the instructor. The timing of grading was an issue for one student who noted that grades were returned later than needed to make a decision to drop the class by the drop date. There were conflicting perspectives
on feedback. A couple of students reported that the instructor provided great feedback, one
specified that the feedback on group assignments was great. Other students did not find the
feedback to be helpful as indicated with comments such as “terrible irrelevant feedback on
discussions” and “sometimes lacked in the area of giving students effective feedback on where to
improve.”

The organization of the course was not mentioned very much, but one student did say that
the course was well-organized. The requirement to complete a weekly quiz on Sundays presented
a problem for one student. Some students enjoyed the class, while others did not. One felt like
the “class was an afterthought to the professor since we were online.” Another student noted that
the instructor seemed like a “smart elic [sic].” One student learned a lot of information but says
the instructor did not play a large part in the learning process.

**Course 1: Instructor Perspective**

The course was organized in modules and designed based on Team-Based Learning
(TBL), which was a challenge since TBL is usually used in face-to-face courses. Students read
the assigned chapters, completed quizzes individually, completed quizzes as teams, answered
case questions as individuals, and then answered case questions as a team. The instructor noted
the quizzes encouraged students to read the chapters. The instructor acted as a facilitator and
interacted in particular points in the class. He provided feedback after the quizzes if there was
something that clearly needed to be addressed.

Students watched video lectures about a case and the instructor hosted a virtual meeting
to review the case instructions and answer any questions the students had about the case study.
Despite sending reminders, there were only two to three people who attended the virtual
meetings. Those who did attend usually did not have questions. He would like to find a way to
get students to read the case early enough to engage more in the question and answer web sessions. Since the students did not seem to be ready to discuss the case at that point, he was considering moving the Q&A to after the individual assignment due date.

Students answered the case questions individually and then as a team. This gave them an opportunity to apply their knowledge to a real situation. Students had the freedom to choose how they meet with their teammates. Some met in person while some met virtually. The instructor expressed a wish to be able to observe those discussions, but that does not work logistically in an online course since students are choosing when and how to meet.

The instructor provided a “structured white space” to guide students in formatting their answers and provided an example of how to do this. This was a document with prompts or space for the students to indicate their choice and outline their support of that choice. The “structured white space” aided the instructor in grading as well. The instructor provided feedback to the team answers and allowed them to update their submissions.

Each module had this same basic structure, although some modules had multiple cases. The instructor said the pacing was “very predictable.” The virtual meetings were on the same day of the week each time, and other due dates were consistent as well. He said with this consistency “They’re less likely to screw it up—forget something.” If dates move around, it is more likely for students to miss deadlines.

In addition to the readings and case videos, the instructor provided three guiding documents for the course: (a) an FAQ document that included instructions on how to do everything in the class, (b) the course syllabus, and (c) the full course schedule. The course schedule included all case milestones. Some of these dates, such as intermediate discussion board deadlines, were not included in the LMS assignments. While most students followed this
process well, there were students who did not read the documents and seemed to be just winging it. In some teams, no members attended the virtual meetings. In an online course, the virtual meeting was the only time the students had the opportunity to hear the instructor’s voice live.

LMS navigation instructions were not provided because the instructor believed the students already knew how to use the LMS. Students rarely asked technical questions. The landing page for the course was the Modules page which encouraged students to work through the module, whereas in the past (with a homepage), students tended to just look at the LMS calendar which did not include all of the content students needed. The instructor did not need technical assistance often. However, when he did, he contacted the LMS administrator in his school.

The instructor indicated that doing stuff up front helped the course to run smoothly and that “well-designed up front usually takes care of the problems.” He stated that “hopefully, the design of the class transfers enough information to know that you can grasp it because you have to do everything first as an individual then you work with your team. If you don't work with your team, you get left out of that grade and you don't want to be there. You don’t want that to happen.”

If something unexpected came up, he emailed the students. He sent reminders for due dates coming up, to not forget instructions for specific things, and for the virtual meetings, but finds that the turnout is still low. There may have been 2 or 3 out of about 40 students who attended, even with the reminder. “These people largely don’t want to be messed with—they’re like just give me a schedule, let me do what I was supposed to do, you know.” Some students emailed and occasionally students met with him in person. Some students reached out to him to talk about their careers.
Using this method where students must turn in individual work before participating in team work was implemented as a means to hold students accountable in team projects. If students did not contribute to the team assessments, they were penalized. If students made a D or below on the quiz, they received that grade rather than the team grade on the team quiz. When teams turned in their case assignments, students were to only list those who contributed so that those who were slacking did not get the team grade.

Individual case assignments were graded based on effort and completeness rather than accuracy. He said that it was hard to give individual feedback in an online course that would mirror the kind of feedback given in a face to face discussion. Feedback for cases was given after the team developed their team answers. The instructor viewed the team discussions and saw that they were learning from each other. The team answers were pretty good. Students were supposed to then review the team feedback and revise their answer.

The instructor has taught this course for several semesters and seems comfortable with it now. When initially developing the course, there were challenges in applying the Team-Based Learning model to the online environment. He worked with an instructional designer to translate the course. The main things he discussed with the instructional designer were the logistics or mechanics of the individual and team quizzes, concerns with academic integrity, and planning the schedule and timing of the course. There were also two other instructors who provided feedback and input throughout the development. He described the development and early semesters as trial and error. “We made mistakes. We designed things that didn't work. And so you're—it’s is like your hair’s on fire trying to put it out in a hurry.” Updating the course now is smoother and includes making smaller changes, replacing cases, and keeping up with changing.
The instructor has taught for several years and sees online learning as a “poor compromise” and “a shallower experience” than face-to-face learning. He teaches online because he has to and sees it as “kind of a necessary evil.” There are a lot of bad online courses. He tried to implement a teaching method that allows students to learn from each other as well as from him. There are some students who take online courses because they incorrectly think it is not as much work as a face-to-face course. “There is as much or more work in the online than there is in the face-to-face.” The issue to him is the “self-selection into these courses by the less motivated student.” This is why he designed accountability into his courses. He would not have to do this “if everybody did what they were supposed to do.”

**Course 1: Comparing Perspectives**

In Course 1, the instructor and students were content with the organization of the course. They differed on other aspects. While the instructor tried to build accountability into the course, students felt affected by team members’ lack of effort. The instructor gave the students the power to not include names of students on the submission, but the students were concerned about the social ramifications that might follow.

The instructor hosted web meetings and said that they were rarely attended. Students said they did not find value in the web meetings since they were usually a repeat of information they had already been told. The instructor said that he worked to update cases, and the students mentioned wanting to have more relevant cases. Students wanted more feedback on the assessments, and the instructor explained that he gives limited feedback without expressing the desire to provide more individual feedback. The instructor and students discussed some of the same topics but had different views.
Course 2: Student Perspective

Course 2 was an upper-level business course. There were 12 comments from students on the IDEA surveys at the conclusion of the Fall 2017 semester. Students reported an overall positive experience in this course. They noted that the instructor was “very knowledgeable and clearly cares about her students.” The lectures were helpful and prepared students for the readings. The schedule made the course load manageable.

One student noted that they “loved that she [the instructor] wasn’t too involved and allowed for my own learning on my own time.” The instructor sent a lot of emails to students, provided feedback, and was responsive. One student noted that there was no busy-work. The instructor also participated in the module discussions. Several students commented on the discussion boards. They enjoyed the discussion boards and that the instructor participated in the discussions. One student even said that they loved the group discussions.

There were a couple of negative comments about the discussion regarding grading. Not all of the discussions were graded. The instructor only graded three randomly selected discussions. This meant that if a student happened to miss one or more of those discussions, their grade was greatly affected. Another student commented that grading was fair.

Course 2: Instructor Perspective

The instructor worked with an instructional designer to design this course in weekly modules. Instructions were provided in the syllabus and the modules. Each module included one chapter of the textbook, a mini-lecture recorded by the instructor, an initial discussion post due on Wednesday, and a quiz due on Friday. When there was an exam, those were due on Fridays. She decided to open the modules on Sunday since previous students indicated they liked to be able to work on weekends. Since the quiz was open Sunday to Friday, students chose when to
take the quiz. This schedule was consistent each week because previous students seem to benefit from having a consistent schedule. She tried to not make any changes to the schedule during the semester.

Discussions played a large role in this course and were completed each week. The instructor and her teaching assistant replied to each student who posted by the due date. Sometimes the responses were questions, and students replied. The instructor hoped that by responding to each student, “it lets them know that even though they’re out there somewhere, that we see them as an individual.” Only three discussion board posts were graded, and additional comments were provided with the grade.

Exams and quizzes were graded automatically by the learning management system. There was a short answer question on the exam, and limited feedback was provided by the instructor or TA. Either all elements were included in the answer or they were not. If the teaching assistant graded discussions or other assignments, she provided comments so the instructor was clear on the reason for the grade as well.

Students could communicate with the instructor or the teaching assistant through email. The instructor hosted a virtual meeting during exam week, although it was poorly attended. She rarely received content-related questions through email or in the virtual meetings. Most questions were logistical. She sent weekly emails about the expectations for the week and for exam reminders. She did not think that everyone read them. She sent them because she was trying to reach everyone and some people paid attention to them. She said the critical thing in communication was making sure the students’ To Do list in the learning management system was accurate. The only feedback she received regarding reminders or navigation in the course was when the To Do list was missing something.
She read students’ comments and paid attention to the issues they brought up. She tried to address those to make the course run more smoothly. She did not receive any questions regarding the navigation or complaints about not being able to find content. If students had questions about technology, they contacted the instructor. She told them to contact the campus technical support, and she contacted the instructional design office in her school to investigate the issue. If it was an issue with the learning management system, she worked with them to fix it and learned how to fix it herself in the future.

There were two main technical issues. One was that the learning management system settings conflicted with how she graded the discussions. It showed the discussions as being worth zero points. She could not put the points in ahead of time because she only graded three, and that would have made the gradebook inaccurate. However, she had to mark the discussions as graded discussions so that the due dates would show up in the students’ To Do list in the learning management system. She said that she did not get complaints. If students were proactive and reached out with an issue, she worked with them to solve it. If a student waited until the very end of the semester, there were fewer options. This made one student mad and disrespectful, so she referred him to her department chair. That was a rare occurrence.

Technology in general was a challenge for her because she did not always know when features were added or changed in the learning management system such as being able to assign different due dates to different students or students not being able to download lecture videos. A few times, she found out about changes from the students. Student preferences of communication methods changed from previous semesters as well, which was hard to keep up with.
Course 2: Comparing Student and Instructor Perspectives

The instructor and students both had a positive experience in the course. The instructor placed high importance on responding to each student in the discussion boards, and the students appreciated the instructor’s involvement in the discussions. Students did not, however, like that only three of the discussion boards were graded. The instructor was consistent with the course schedule, and students found this to be helpful in managing the course.

Course 3: Student Perspective

Course 3 was an upper-level business course. There were 15 comments from students on the IDEA surveys at the conclusion of the Fall 2017 semester. Two students completed the research surveys as part of this study in Spring 2018. Students in this course experienced lack of clarity, many technical difficulties, and busy work. Students noted that the course was unstructured and difficult to navigate. One student felt that the navigation was difficult for the instructor as well. However, other students noted the course was organized well and instructions were provided in the syllabus and modules.

Several students indicated there were many technical issues during the class, and that the instructor was not helpful. Multiple students noted the instructor was not responsive to emails and questions on the ‘FAQ’ discussion board regarding technical issues while a couple of students said that he was very responsive. He told students to contact technical support. Students felt that the instructor should have taken responsibility for the technical issues, designed the course better in order to avoid the technical issues, and been more competent with the technology. One student noted that the instructor “did not understand how [the learning management system] works.” Some technical issues provided were assignments not being accessible, tests not being accessible during proctoring appointment times, and group assignment
submissions being considered late when they were on time. One group had this happen twice and stated the instructor threatened to give them all a grade of 0.

One student was “very disappointed in [the university] for allowing this course to be taught by someone who clearly does not care nor has the experience for instructing this material and for allowing this to be a 7-week course to begin with.” Another student noted “7-week courses are more intense, and I prepared for that going into it, however, this course is far more demanding than I could have anticipated.” And another student stated, “A fast paced course . . . requires an instructor that is as equally fast paced—was not able to keep up with the pace of this course, and as a result, I was not able to keep up with the pace of this course.” However, one student stated that, “although a short online course, I was able to learn and retain many important lessons pertinent to being successful in the workplace.”

Multiple students found the work load to be too heavy for the 7-week timeframe. Students felt there was too much busy work and instructions for work were not clear. Inconsistency in content and grading was an issue. Content on exams did not reflect the homework assignments. The time limit for the test was too narrow. Group assignment instructions were not clear. The grading was not clear to students. Several students reported that feedback was either confusing, missing, or late. Feedback did not provide enough information to allow students to correct assignments going forward.

The two students who completed the research survey in Spring 2018 had more positive views of the course, stated the instructor was responsive, and stated the course was easy to navigate. However, this is in stark contrast with those who provided comments on the IDEA surveys at the end of the course in Fall 2017. There was an overall negative view of this course. One student said that “the content of this course is not difficult and yet I feel it was designed to
promote failure.” Two students said the university should be ashamed of this teaching. Another student stated, “though this course has high potential for teaching students the importance of management in the workforce, and life in general, the class that I participated in was not providing this.”

Course 3: Instructor Perspective

The course was redesigned with two other instructors and an instructional designer. It was organized into eight modules based on the flow of the topics covered rather than the order of the textbook chapters so that it would make more sense to the students. Instructional materials included textbook chapters, other readings, one video from the instructor, and some videos from the publisher. Videos were added when visuals were needed and helped to break up the class. Publisher resources were also provided which included the text, activities and quizzes. There were three major exams, each assessing five chapters and consisting of both multiple choice and essay questions. Students were given a study guide of 10 essay questions 1 week prior to the exam, and 4 of those questions were on the exam. Instructions were provided in the syllabus and designed in the assignments and discussions. The instructor also incorporated activities outside of the textbook that help students to get to know themselves and their groups in preparation for group assignments. The course calendar was set up to have consistent due dates with discussion posts due on Wednesdays and other assignments due on Sundays. The instructor said that the organization and consistency of the course dramatically affected the students’ experience “because that's their guide.”

There were, however, many complaints due to technology. Students had access to tutorials for how to use the technologies. However, students and the instructor had trouble accessing the course websites and received error messages from the first day of classes. The
instructor did not place blame on the students because “they were doing what they thought they were supposed to do.” When students had technical issues, they were told to contact the textbook publisher and submit a ticket. However, sometimes the response from technical support was that the instructor needed to do something.

The instructor tried to help the course run more smoothly by reaching out to resources such as the school instructional designer and the textbook publisher so that he could respond quickly. That made a big difference. The instructor worked with the instructional designer and the publisher to correct the matter after it was determined that the issue was on the publisher’s end. He met with the instructional designer weekly to discuss what was going right and wrong. Working with the instructional designer was very helpful, however, the instructional designer was not very familiar with the system. He said they made some mistakes in the process, but they got through it.

Due to the constant issues, the instructor moved due dates almost every day. He evaluated the course activities and eliminated some assignments while still including enough work for the students to be able to learn what they needed to learn. He adjusted the schedule and corrected dates. He indicated that extending due dates may have benefitted the students, but it was still an imposition because it changed their schedule. Another obstacle came with using the proctoring service. The test date changes caused some students to incur fees which the instructor requested to have removed. The instructor was frustrated. He said that since a lot of work went into the planning of the course, he should have been able to stick to that plan. That was the key to him—to get the plan in place and then focus on incorporating current events and encouraging students to write about their opinions of those current events and share their experiences that related to those stories.
The constant issues resulted in frequent communication, mostly written. Despite the quantity of communication, the instructor said that the course lacked good open dialogue. He felt like every day, he just turned on the computer and started working on problems. He sent daily announcements regarding technical issues. He could not call an in-person meeting to discuss the issues, which made communication more difficult.

He wrote as much as he could to explain what was going on. He wanted to provide all of the information even though he knew it might be too much for some students. Some students wrote back that this was the most frustrating course they had had. He responded to them letting them know he understood why they felt that way. He thought it was important to not ignore these messages. The publisher’s representatives also communicated with the students about the technical issues, and students talked with their teammates about the issues as well.

The instructor sent reminders regarding discussion posts, readings, and missed assignments. Students who had missed assignments responded that they had forgotten or would complete it that night. The reminders were intended to be helpful. However, since they were having so many technical issues, the instructor felt that the students saw these assignment reminders as “just another nuisance; it was a thing that they had to check out. The trust was not there.” He said that it was hard to develop that trust in an online course. He thought that he may have overused the feature and should have emailed less often. If students were struggling, he reached out to them privately.

There was frustration in the course for the instructor and the students. The instructor indicated that after using these systems for multiple semesters, the technical issues they experienced should not have occurred and made it more difficult to communicate with students. He wanted to help the students feel like they were part of the university and to make sure that
they were comfortable with the content. It took a lot of time to go through student responses, which sometimes included information about their personal situations. He wanted to be there for them, but the technical issues made communicating difficult. He said that students were also frustrated, which he completely understood.

The technical issues made the instructor feel bad about penalizing students on assignments, so he tried to grade more leniently. The students hated the exams and thought they were too difficult. The instructor said that online students were more concerned about their grades than his face-to-face students. He attributed some of this concern to maintaining scholarships. Students were required to meet online in their groups, and he saw evidence of that communication through reminders of the meetings. While communication between groups was good, there were some teams that dealt with students not participating. The instructor sent messages to students who missed meeting to make sure they were still in the course. Some had trouble accessing the course.

Students received automatic feedback from the publisher website assignments. For the other individual and team assignments, the instructor tried to include feedback to each student pointing out positive areas, indicating what needed to be improved, and asking if he could help them to better understand the material. Some assignments were graded using a rubric and providing some comments. Some rubrics were more tailored to the assignment than others. Feedback was provided on some discussions, but not on others. He did not answer each student because answering every single student would diminish the value of the responses.

**Course 3: Comparing Student and Instructor Perspectives**

In this course, it was clear that the technical issues overshadowed the course. The students and the instructor were frustrated by the constant technical difficulties and changes that
resulted from the issues. The instructor felt that he was in constant communication but did not have the students’ trust. Some students said the instructor was not responsive. Some students indicated the instructor was not prepared or did not know what he was doing. The instructor said that he tried repeatedly to fix things, but he also understood why students would hold him responsible for the technical issues.

**Course 4: Student Perspective**

Course 4 was an upper-level health care-related course. There were seven comments on the IDEA survey at the end of the Fall 2017 semester. The students in the course had very positive reviews of the course and the instructor’s involvement in the course. One student said that he/she “was honored to be in her class.” They stated that the instructor was very engaged, very responsive, and always available to help them when needed.

They enjoyed the content of the class, felt that the workload was fair, and that the instructor provided good instructions. However, one student said that the “book helped more than her PowerPoints.” Two students noted that it was sometimes difficult to understand the instructor in the recorded lectures.

**Course 4: Instructor Perspective**

This course was offered both online and on campus, so students were able to choose which section to take. The instructor believed students chose to take the course online so they would not have to attend class at a specific time. The instructor allowed the online students to virtually join the on-campus lectures on Mondays. Lectures included examples of applying concepts as well as questions posed from the campus students and answered by the instructor. She posted the recordings of the lectures in the learning management system for students to watch later if they were not able to attend synchronously. She had issues recording some of the
lectures and those recordings were not clear. When she recorded outside of the classroom previously, the clarity was good. However, those recordings would not have included the student interaction from the on-campus students, so she chose to use the in-class recordings for this semester.

After viewing the live or recorded lecture, students completed textbook and article readings, a quiz, and an application assignment each week. Students had the whole week to complete the quiz and assignment. Quizzes included multiple choice questions on the readings. Once completed, students could see the correct answers. Assignments were open-book, hands-on application and sometimes incorporated information they should have learned in the previous course. The instructor tried to design assignments that included everything students needed to learn without using open-ended assignments. Open-ended assignments required too much time to grade, especially at the end of the semester when she was determining final grades.

Some discussion questions based on a case study were presented for students to consider. Students were not required to post on a discussion board and were not graded on responses to the questions. She said that it would not have been beneficial for students to discuss these concepts with each other, and there were too many students to monitor in a discussion board.

Every week was organized this way, which the instructor explained in the orientation during the first class session/lecture. The structure made the course easier to follow and was important for online students since they were not in the physical classroom. The instructor said that it took students about 2 weeks to get used to the structure. This could have been because each faculty member teaches differently. She also provided instructions for navigating the course and the textbook publisher materials. The instructor gave students instructions for contacting the instructional design person, on-campus technical support, or the learning management technical
support for technical assistance. Students could have also contacted the instructor with issues during the exams.

In addition to the weekly assignments, there was a midterm and a final exam. The final exam was proctored using an online proctoring service. Weekly quizzes and assignments were not proctored. She said that if students did not complete the weekly quizzes and assignments on their own it was evident in the midterm and final exams. Exam questions were automatically graded. Students saw automatic feedback to see which questions were missed and the correct answers for quizzes once the due date passed. Individual feedback was provided on quizzes and exams if the student asked the instructor for an explanation. There was an option in the learning management system to leave audio comments within the learning management system gradebook, but she did not think she had the voice for that, so she responded through text feedback in the gradebook.

Students contacted the instructor during exams if they had issues when using the online proctoring service. There was an incident during the study semester where a student began the test close to the end of the proctoring window, so he was not allotted the appropriate amount of time. There were also some adjustments made for students who had accommodations due to a disability. The instructor also had an incident where a student brought materials to the exam, although the materials were from the previous instructor’s course and no longer accurate.

The instructor communicated with students by answering questions and sending some reminders. She said that students interacted with her rather than her interacting with them. Students contacted her when they had questions, and she responded. If students had questions, they emailed in the learning management system. She sent an announcement because she believed that if one student had a question, often that student represented quite a number of the
students who had a similar problem. Students typically did not have questions until they started working on an assignment.

Class size did not really make an impact on teaching the course. There were more emails around exam time, but that did not bother the instructor. Since reminders for assignments were automatically posted in the learning management system, she did not send her own. She only sent reminders for the first 2 weeks while students were getting used to the schedule. She also sent announcements for the midterm date, the format of the questions for the midterms, the format of the quizzes, and the settings for the quizzes. She did this because different instructors had different formats for quizzes.

The instructor did not see a significant difference in the grades for the midterm and final between the online and on campus students. She thought that it would be beneficial for students to come to class and ask questions. However, she attributed the lack of difference in grades to the online students being self-disciplined and following the directions. She also said that her class was not the students’ first online course.

Students did better on the final exam than on the midterm. The instructor says this was because, for the final exam, students had to come to campus or take the test with the proctoring service. After the exams, she analyzed the results to see what questions were missed the most and changed or replaced questions. She read the questions, tried to see why the students chose specific answers, and whether or not she had covered the material clearly.

In discussing student support, she said that she only knew the students in this course; she did not see the whole picture. There was a student advisor she could talk to about a student if there was a concern. For example, one student had a concern about her grade affecting her financial aid. The instructor spoke with the advisor to decide what to do about other factors that
were affecting the student’s situation and the best method to address it. Having that communication with the advisor was helpful.

In initially designing the course, the instructor changed what the previous instructor had designed to change the focus of the content and align with industry requirements. She chose the ebook, which had a good chapter structure, included exercises, and was also good for travel. She covered all chapters since students do not like when the whole text is not used. She and the instructional designer had to work through some technical issues in creating the application assignments in the learning management system. The other option would have been to have students scan and email their work, which would not have been efficient for grading.

The instructor said there was a learning curve in building the assignments. The instructor and designer had to work through little nuances of the questions such as communicating to students that the fill-in-the-blank answers must be entered a certain way. The answers had to match the key exactly. If a dollar sign or decimal was not correct, the question would have been marked incorrect. The instructor provided more options in the key to allow other additional correct answers. She also provided examples of how to format the answers. While this required a lot of work for the instructor and instructional designer the first semester, the assignments were improved each semester.

Course 4: Comparing Student and Instructor Perspectives

The instructor and students had a good experience with this course. The students and instructor agreed that the instructor was responsive to student questions. They also agreed that some of the lecture videos were not clear. The instructor made an effort to make the assignments relevant and the modules consistent. At least one student noted that the workload in the course was fair.
Course 5: Student Perspective

Course 5 was a lower-level business course. There were six comments from students in the IDEA surveys at the conclusion of the Fall 2017 semester. One student completed the research survey. One student participated in a phone interview. The overall feedback of the course was mixed. There were positive comments regarding the instructor’s responsiveness and negative comments regarding the relevance of the course and test issues.

A first-time online student noted that taking an online course for the first time requires students to learn three different processes—the learning management system, the requirements for the class, and working with a team online. This course provided a great experience. Another student returning to college after a 20-year break said that this online course was a great method for a working student with a family.

One student expressed the need for consistency across courses rather than each instructor doing something different in terms of course navigation. There was a video provided in the course to instruct the students on navigation, but one student said that it was easy to overlook something in the video and would prefer the consistency across courses. Students were pleased with the organization of this course which was organized into modules. Just as in a face-to-face course, the instructor provided all of the materials (readings, optional YouTube videos, etc.) and instructions the students needed; it was provided in the modules. This gave students everything they needed for the course, helped students to plan, and helped the course to run smoothly. The instructor provided good explanations of the content as well as information on how to get started with the course, how to contact technical support, and due dates for course assignments.

One student stated that since everything was provided in the course, they did not need to contact the instructor with any questions. Therefore, they had no interaction with the instructor.
Another student only interacted with those in the class as required and was not pleased with the course. It was stated that the students initiated communication with the instructor, and this student wished the instructor had initiated the communication and provided a more personal touch. When students contacted the instructor, she was timely and responsive in answering questions. She also participated in the discussion board. One student specified that the instructor was active in the Frequently Asked Questions discussion board, but not in the weekly discussions. Additionally, she made announcements and sent reminders from the learning management system for upcoming tests, group assignments, and other information.

As one student noted, “communication is a key factor and having access to communicate with the instructor was very important. Having access to instructor communication greatly improved my satisfaction of the course.” The navigation instructions, technical support, and reminders made understanding the whole classroom experience easier as reported by a student who said this helped to improve their knowledge of required material and increased their satisfaction with the course. The instructions helped students to be able to “get out what was intended.”

Misunderstandings were clarified individually when asked or to the whole class in announcements. Feedback was given on the group project and one other assignment. Feedback given “helped improved knowledge of the course which increased satisfaction.” One student noted wanting more feedback. However, she indicated that she wanted feedback just for her own ego and that it would not have affected future assignments. A couple of students found the tests to be difficult, and one noted there was not enough time allotted at 40 minutes for a 50-question test. However, two students appreciated that the exams were not proctored. This showed the instructor trusted her students and made the test less stressful. Feedback was given on the group
project and one other assignment, but not on other assignments. There were only two comments on the content of the course. One student found the course to be “relevant and easy to follow” while another student described it as “redundant and boring.” A student with a job and a family noted that it takes dedication to keep up with the daily work.

**Course 5: Instructor Perspective**

The instructor designed this course with an instructional designer about 6 years ago as a 14-week course, then into a 7-week course. The course was organized into 14 modules set up along the same order as the face-to-face course. Since this was a 7-week course, students completed two modules per week, concurrently. Each module had an introduction; learning objectives of “what things that they should know when they leave the module”; and learning material such as the textbook, YouTube and other videos, publisher created podcasts, and optional publisher activities. Most modules had a discussion board assignment. There was also a group project, two individual projects, and three tests with five chapters on each. Much of the information was memorizing vocabulary, and topics did not really build on each other. All assignments in the module were due on Sunday night at 9:00 pm. This consistent pattern eliminated questions about due dates and helped the course to run more smoothly. Since this was a 7-week course, the instructor said students may have felt that it went quickly. There was a lot of information covered in a short time and not a lot of time between tests.

The instructor provided clear instructions, which seemed to be effective because she did not get a lot of questions. She said she tried to “in some ways go overboard with my instructions so that there is there's not a lot of room for error; they shouldn't have any trouble figuring out what it is they're supposed to do.” She did not provide navigation instructions for the learning management system because they were already provided in the course. She did not have many
technical issues. Traditional-aged students did not report any issues while some older students were not familiar with the technology and reached out for assistance. If she was unable to assist with an issue, she referred them to the campus or learning management system technical support.

The instructor communicated with students through the learning management system email, frequently asked questions discussion board, and by sending announcements. She answered students’ questions about content if they reached out, which was rare because the material was pretty straightforward. She sent reminders weekly to update students on upcoming tests, assignments, to start on projects, etc. She sent reminders to specific students who had not submitted an assignment. She also sent out reminders about the group project and working together on the project. She encouraged students to work out any group issues within their group.

The instructor thought the reminders were helpful because sometimes “it’s out of sight, out of mind. So they forget that certain things are pressing because they’re not necessarily seeing me, you know twice a week or three times a week like my face to face students do.” She also thought it was helpful that students were able to email her at any time. She did not answer 24 hours a day, but they could reach out whenever they wanted. Technical support was available 24 hours a day. With about 65 students, keeping up with communication was difficult at times. The students were separated into smaller groups for the discussions so that they would have a better experience.

Feedback was provided on all assignments. Some feedback was more generic, while feedback on individual projects and group projects was more detailed. The instructor did not participate in the discussions on the group projects unless a student reached out with an issue. On the other discussion boards, she responded to some students. Most students completed the
discussion assignment the day that it was due, so it was logistically difficult to respond to every student in a timely manner.

Having an online course with an enrollment of around 65 students made it difficult to return grades in a timely manner. Since this was a 7-week course, students needed to receive grades often. The instructor did not want them to wait until the end of the course to know their grades. Students would have been upset if they did not receive their grades quickly and they would have evaluated her on that.

The group assignment in the course presented a technical issue. When a student dropped from the course, the instructor was not notified. The name remained in the group list, so other students in the group thought the student who dropped was just not participating. The instructor saw the number of students per group, so she did not realize that the group was missing members. When the students started working on the project later in the semester, they complained about the student to the instructor. Unfortunately, at that point it was too late to change the group memberships, so she told them to continue with the group members who were active. She would have liked a way to be notified if students leave the course. In addition to the instructor’s feedback and support in the course, students had access to the university writing center and career center, and the instructor provided the contact information for these resources.

**Course 5: Comparing Student and Instructor Perspectives**

While some students were unhappy with the relevance or interest of the content, the students and instructors had a good experience. They agreed that the course was well-organized, provided all content needed, and the instructor was responsive when contacted by students. Some students indicated a desire for more feedback on assessments, and the instructor explained that
the high class enrollment made it difficult to provide more personalized feedback. The instructor noted issues with group assignment, but the students did not mention issues with group members.

**Course 6: Student Perspective**

Course 6 was an upper-level business course. There were eight comments from students in the IDEA surveys at the conclusion of the Fall 2017 semester. One student completed the research survey. Students had positive and negative comments about their experience. They noted good communication, but also said instructions could be clearer. However, the course was also overwhelming for some.

The course was well-organized which made it easier for students to find course materials and due dates. One student noted that providing weekly assignment instructions in the course helped him/her to

be more aware of the guidelines I was supposed to follow when completing the assignments. I really enjoyed the way the assignments were laid out and working with the group that I was assigned to. He setup all assignments, quizzes, discussions, and group projects for us. [Learning Management System] technical support information was also provided.

Other students thought the instructor could have been clearer on the materials and assignment expectations. Students were able to re-watch the lectures to deepen their understanding of the concepts, and the lectures were concise. The lectures and PowerPoints were helpful, although the lectures did not match the PowerPoints in some cases. One student was not sure from which book they should find the reading assignment for each week. The instructor also provided examples to show how to complete the sections of the individual project. One student said the class was full of busy work.

The instructor was responsive, timely in answering emails and phone calls, and provided helpful feedback on assignments. He let the students know that he was available if they had
questions. One student said that he is “truly passionate about his students.” He sent weekly reminders for assignments and reminders for exams. The navigation, technical support information, and reminders helped at least one student to be more organized and know when assignments were due. The student stated that the instructor “was extremely organized and thorough; this made my satisfaction in the course much higher than it would have been if the course were not so organized and structured.” The instructor provided detailed feedback, which allowed students to know where and how to improve. There were also a couple of concerns with grading. Discussions were graded as 0, 50, or 100. Students either made an A or an F. A student also noted that the final exam was comprehensive and weighted heavily. This student also said that “most professors seem to be moving away from comprehensive finals.”

This was a 7-week course which one student said was “like trying to take a drink from a fire hose the whole time.” Despite it being overwhelming, students liked the course. One student was grateful for the instructor’s understanding during situations that came up and adhering to the university’s make-up policy. Another student was impressed with the instructor’s ability to “condense the material into only 7-weeks and I don’t feel like I lost out on learning anything.” One student indicated a desire to have more time in the semester to express what was learned. Two students stated that they had already applied what they learned in this course to their jobs.

Course 6: Instructor Perspective

The instructor said this course was wonderful overall. Students were engaged, responsive, and had great discussions. They seemed committed to learning and appeared to have personally developed throughout the course, which he says does not occur each semester.

The instructor did all that entailed designing and delivering the course content in an online format ensuring that students were receiving the information that structured their courses appropriately to
accomplish the learning objectives which were set up for the course. And within each module and developing and administering assessments. Across the modules across the themes of the course and in the course of the course itself.

The instructional design staff helped the instructor to design a course that he felt was strong, structured, and as rigorous as an on-campus course.

The course was organized into 11 modules in addition to an introductory module to provide the course requirements and expectations. This included a video about the instructor and how-to videos for course tasks. Instructions were provided in the syllabus and modules. The 11 content modules were developed around the four themes developed by a team in the department. A textbook was chosen that addressed these themes. Some modules covered more than one chapter, but all modules were organized in the same way. Each module had an overview, learning objectives, narrated PowerPoints, chapter quizzes, lecture quizzes, and supplemental videos from external sources such as YouTube or TED Talks, individual assignments, team assignments and/or discussion boards, and the optional resources and a wrap up.

This organization “allows them to work through the material in a sequential way.” The consistency of organization across modules and other courses provided familiarity. After the first module, the students knew where to find everything, which eliminated stress and distraction of having to find materials. The instructor did not provide instructions for navigating the learning management system because students were familiar with the system and any new students did not ask questions about navigating it. Students who did have technical issues with their computer were instructed to contact the campus or learning management system technical support and send a copy of the ticket to the instructor. For some questions, the students emailed the instructor.

The instructor added creativity in the material itself, but maintained structure to allow students to focus on learning. Students read the textbook, watched lecture videos for some topics,
and reviewed lecture handouts for key topics. He provided detailed instructions for completing each individual and team assignment. For some assignments, he sent announcements with additional instructions and examples. He believed that providing an example of the assignment helped the students to create a better product, as compared to students in previous semesters.

A detailed schedule was provided with all items for the semester, which could be used as a checklist. The learning management system calendar was updated to have the correct dates. Setting up the course and dates properly prior to the beginning of the course was extremely important and helped the course run smoothly. If the course was not set up properly, it could have caused stress for the students. It was important to the instructor to not make changes during the semester because instability in the course causes anxiety in the students.

The instructor communicated with students through a course overview video, instructor introduction video, and instructor-created how to videos for tasks such as writing proper discussion board posts. He sent announcements weekly to recap the previous week, talk about the expectations for the upcoming week, notify students of any changes, and remind students of any due dates. He said this helped him to engage with students and students seemed to like it. He also encouraged students to visit the office or meet virtually if they had questions. He wanted to provide a way for distant students to discuss issues.

The instructor sent reminders to students who had not yet completed an upcoming assignment and for exams. If a student missed multiple assignments, he reached out to them to encourage them to participate in the course. He thinks this helped students and showed that he cares about their success. Some students responded thanking him for the email and letting him know why they had been inactive. They usually came back and improved their performance. The instructor thinks that his reaching out may have encouraged the students to do more and was
helpful for students who may have forgotten about an assignment or students who were also working. He says this let the students know that he was on their side and might have increased their motivation.

The instructor encouraged students to post content-related questions on the frequently asked questions discussion board so that everyone could benefit from seeing the answer. It was likely that multiple students would have the same questions. Some content questions were on concepts that needed to be discussed further to be better understood. He saw students asking content questions as a sign that the course was set up well since the students were able to focus on the content.

The instructor participated in the discussion board enough to show that he was present. If he saw an issue with something a student posted, he emailed them directly so that it was not overlooked. He provided very detailed feedback on the first two discussions to guide students to follow the expectations. Remaining discussions received less written feedback accompanied with a rubric. Grades were provided for quizzes and exams. Students received feedback on individual assignments in the form of a rubric and written comments. Some feedback was brief and some was longer, depending on the assignment. Feedback included strengths and areas for improvements. He tried to be constructive and positive in the feedback. However, he said that sometimes it was difficult to find something constructive to say about an excellent submission or something positive to say about a submission that needed substantial revision.

Students interacted with their team members virtually and were required to record a virtual meeting. This is one area the instructor said he needed to improve upon. He needed to teach the students how to use the software. There was some difficulty in getting students to engage in the team assignments online. Some groups just divided the tasks rather than really
collaborating. He wished he could be more involved and provide more feedback throughout the semester on the group work.

In addition to the team and other assignments, the instructor did small things throughout the semester that he said helped to prepare students to be professionals. This included holding them to professional standards for reports and emails. At the end of the semester, he sent a wrap up email to summarize what was learned in the course and to let students know that he was available to discuss their academic or professional careers.

Course 6: Comparing Student and Instructor Perspectives

The course was well-organized. While the instructor stated that he provided very clear instructions, some students disagreed. Sometimes students were unsure of what to read or of assignment expectations. They did agree that the examples were helpful. As the instructor explained, he graded the discussions at three levels—0, 50, or 100. Students did not like this grading method where they either earned an F or an A. Students agreed and appreciated how responsive and communicative the instructor was and felt that he cared about their success in the course.

Course 7: Student Perspective

Course 7 was a lower-level business course. There were 19 comments from students on the IDEA surveys at the conclusion of the Fall 2017 semester. Students had a very positive experience in this course. The course was well-organized and easy to navigate. One student noted that the course was “definitely challenging, but awesome.”

Several students mentioned aspects of clarity throughout the course. The objectives were clear to the students. The lectures were beneficial. Students appreciated having a study guide and being encouraged to review learning materials after finding out what they missed. They also
liked that the material was relevant. One student said that he was an “inspirational instructor who
knows how to keep this course interesting, relevant, and contemporary.”

Multiple students commented on the instructor’s communication practices. They noted the instructor was very responsive, available, professional, and helpful. Another student said that “this is a perfect example of classes that should be taught more.” The only negative comment from the IDEA survey was one student who was not interested in the subject.

**Course 7: Instructor Perspective**

Course 7 was originally developed by the previous instructor and an instructional designer. The current instructor reviewed the content and liked the way that it was developed. He kept most of the course intact but added or replaced videos or articles as needed to incorporate more current information.

The course was organized into weekly modules which consisted of learning objectives to tell them what they would get out of the module, textbook readings of one or two chapters, and PowerPoint slides. There was also a PowerPoint video narrated by the previous instructor because the current instructor did not have time to re-record the videos before the semester began. Many modules also had additional articles, NBC Learn videos, and/or YouTube videos. The textbook chapters were in order except for one. This chapter was moved because the topic worked better with a later chapter. The instructor said that the topics in the modules built on one another. Students took a quiz in each module. There were exams, and he provided a study guide for each exam.

The instructor did not provide navigation instructions for the learning management system since he assumed the students had all used it before. The only technical questions he received were regarding accessing the PowerPoints, and those were because of the students’
computer settings. If needed, technical support was provided by the learning management system or the campus technical support.

The instructor loved teaching this course and thought that this was a good course because it covered every area of the discipline. Students saw “a good snippet of, kind of, every possible thing that they could encounter in the real world and in a job.” He included current events discussions for extra credit even though the students did not really need the extra points. He used those as a way to encourage students to read the articles and learn about how the concepts applied in real-life cases. However, few students took advantage of those opportunities. He did not have a good way to see how much effort students put into the course in other areas, but he could see that few were active in the extra credit discussions.

The instructor interacted with the students through video, email, announcements, and the discussion board. Every week he sent an announcement or email to provide tips for what students should look for in the chapter or provide more information about a case related to the PowerPoint, or to connect the PowerPoint and the textbook. He provided information to help students better understand the concepts for that week. He sent a lot of reminders and was amazed at how many “young adults can’t figure out how to work a calendar.” Reminders were sent weekly or every other week about due dates and quizzes. He hoped these were helpful and appreciated.

If a student asked a question, the instructor answered through an announcement so that all students could benefit. He assumed that if one student had a question, other students had the same question. Students were welcome to contact him, but they rarely did to discuss content. If students contacted him, it was usually to ask if he would accept late work. His preferred method of contact was email so that everything is in writing and could be referenced later. He also
sometimes provided additional information about a concept in an announcement to help students better understand the material. Assessment feedback on quizzes and exams was provided instantly and included tips for where students could find the answer in the textbook or PowerPoint. If he saw that a question was bad, he adjusted the grades.

**Course 7: Comparing Student and Instructor Perspectives**

This course provided a positive experience for both the students and instructor. There were no reported technical difficulties. The students appreciated that the instructor provided clear objectives and was responsive to them. Students and the instructor also felt the course was relevant to the students’ future careers.

**Course 8: Student Perspective**

Course 8 was an upper-level business course. The instructor did not provide the comments from the IDEA surveys. No students completed the research survey.

**Course 8: Instructor Perspective**

In designing this course, the instructor said that she looked at what other people were doing and decided not to do that. She tried to approach the course design from a student’s perspective. She worked with an instructional designer to keep the course simple and streamlined so that students knew what they were expected to do. This course used the same content as the on-campus version of the course except it was organized into only eight modules. She felt more modules would be overwhelming for students. The first and last modules lasted 1 week and the other modules lasted 2 weeks.

Each of the eight modules include a short, recorded lecture, discussion, and a quiz. Students read a textbook chapter, read current articles, and watched videos related to course topics. The instructor allowed students to use older versions of the textbook in order to save money. Since she
thought students would not listen to her lectures, she kept them to about 8 minutes long. Students in this course did not have the redundancy factor her on-campus students had where they heard content more than once, and she thought that was a problem. Technology was not an issue and some students knew how to navigate the course better than she did. If students could not access an article link, they Googled it. The only issue that occurred was something that needed to be published and was easily solved.

The instructor provided clear instructions for the weekly discussion board assignments. She was pleased that students discussed controversial topics respectfully, but she thought the discussions lacked depth. Since students often corrected each other, she was hesitant to participate in the discussion. If students were off-track, she corrected them through an announcement to the whole class or messages to specific students. These discussions were weekly, but they were open for the entire semester to allow for more discussion. Sometimes students included personal experiences, and she provided positive feedback and encouragement.

The instructor said that her students earned high grades, which showed her that they learned the material. She was not concerned with a lot of students getting high grades; she saw this as a positive indication that they were learning. She provided individualized feedback on the discussions and papers and tried to incorporate positive and constructive feedback. She also gave awards for the best discussion posts. She said that students who were praised continued to do well in the course. She also awarded more than the allotted points if students performed beyond the expectation and helped to teach other students in the discussion board. Students were also required to take a field trip and write a paper about it. Students located in the city where the university is located were assigned to visit a specified place. Students outside of the area went to approved locations near
them. The instructor worked with them to find an appropriate place that fit the objectives of the activity.

The instructor provided her contact information to students so they could text, call, or email her at any time. They had direct access to her, but they did not abuse this. She found that students preferred to communicate through text messages and did not listen to voicemails. She said that instructors have to know their audience in terms of communication preferences. She said that it is not fair to students to not be available or answer questions on the weekend. If a student was doing schoolwork on a Saturday, getting the answer on Monday may have been too late. While her syllabus said she would respond within 24-48 hours, she often responded more quickly.

The instructor thought that online instructors should be more available to their students. They need to be available on weekend. She says that otherwise, instructors get the benefits of teaching online at the students’ expense. She said it was easier to teach online because she did not have to go to class and the course was already developed. Doing everything from her phone was easier than going to class. Students paid extra for online courses and sometimes resented it. She said that students paid her salary, so she was there to serve the students. She did not see a reason why she could not be available to answer emails throughout the day.

The instructor was also proactive in communication. She made frequent announcements to remind students to participate in the discussions, to watch the videos in preparation for the quizzes, or to clarify misunderstandings of the content. If multiple students got something wrong, she sent an announcement clarifying it. She said that happened often because students entered the class with preconceived ideas about the topics. Is the instructor made a mistake on a quiz, she fixed it and notified the students. It was important to her that instructors admit their mistakes. She thought the reminders were helpful even though she did not receive any responses to them. Students had
complicated lives. Some students enrolled in the course and did not do the work. She said there was not anything she could do for those students.

The instructor tried to mentor students, which was difficult in an online course. If she saw potential for a student to attend professional school, she encouraged them to pursue it. She was open to talking to students about their careers. She said that mentoring is important, especially for undergraduate students. It is only possible to really get to know students if the instructor is accessible. She also indicated that it is important for instructors to be understanding and to remember that they got breaks in their careers.

Course 8: Comparing Student and Instructor Perspectives

No student data were collected or provided for Course 8, so student and instructor perspectives could not be compared.

Course 9: Student Perspective

Course 9 was an upper-level business course. There were 13 comments from students in the IDEA surveys at the conclusion of the Fall 2017 semester. One student completed the research survey. Two students described this as a typical online course. One elaborated that meant the instructor provided a syllabus, calendar, and lecture videos. The textbook and lectures were beneficial. Technical support was provided by the learning management system (LMS). The students watched lectures, checked the LMS for deadlines, completed readings, did homework, participated in discussions, and took exams. One student found the workload to be difficult. While this student found extra assignments interesting, they felt that the weight of the grade did not reflect the time required to complete the assessment.

Students liked how the course was structured since it provided them with the weekly expectations. Even though due dates were provided, one student noted that the due dates were
inconsistent. Assignments were not due on the same day of the week for each module, which was a complaint of one student. While there was little feedback on assignments, the instructor communicated with the students often. One student noted that the instructor needed to clean up his email etiquette, but many students were pleased and even seemed impressed with the instructor’s communication.

The instructor sent frequent reminders and announcements to students, which helped students to stay on track. He responded on discussion forums to answer questions and clarify misunderstandings in more detail. Participating in the discussion board kept the students engaged and the course running more smoothly. Periodically, the instructor would check in with the students to see how they were doing with the material. One student said that the instructor helped him "tremendously" by providing study tips and encouragement. Another student noted he respected that the instructor was “active with making sure his students were doing their work.” Another student said, “It made it much better knowing that he actually seemed to care about the class.”

Students saw the instructor as caring about them and their futures. He made it clear that he was available to help the students with the course and with their professional endeavors. One student who noted this also said, “I wish I could have him as my professor for the rest of my college career.” Another student learned a lot in the course the can be applied in a future career. This student said he “definitely would recommend [this course] to any student.”

**Course 9: Instructor Perspective**

This was the second time the instructor taught this course online. The course was developed by someone else. While he said that some instructors do not want to teach a course someone else designed, he was comfortable with it because he knew the instructor, the course
had been reviewed by the instructional designer, the course met Quality Matters standards, and he liked the textbook. The only change he made was to move the due dates to Sundays to allow students to complete assignments on the weekends. However, some assignments were due on different days of the week.

The course included a video for navigating the learning management system, how to be successful online, a syllabus, introductions to the course and instructor, and an academic integrity statement students had to sign before they could access the first module. These items provided a clear idea of the course expectations. The modules were structured similarly to other courses in the school. There were 12 or 13 modules, each with an overview, learning activities, PowerPoint presentation, lectures recorded by the previous instructor, discussion, research task, a quiz, and a module wrap up. The instructor did not re-record the lectures because the content was accurate, but he did tell the students that they were recorded by another instructor. Students also completed three exams. He said that some students may have seen some of this as busy work, but the activities reinforced each other. The activities online were similar to what they would do in class, except with the addition of the quizzes which helped students to prepare for the exams.

Students answered questions they were required to research on the internet. These were graded and some feedback was provided. The majority of students earned full credit for the assignment if it was completed. Students participated in discussions and often brought up current events. He let students drive the discussion and wanted students to feel a sense of ownership of the course that he did not think online students usually feel. He corrected students as needed, but otherwise waited until toward the end of the discussion period to share what trends he noticed. He also noted when students expressed opinions that were different from the textbook. That showed they were forming their own opinions.
More value was placed on the quizzes and exams than on discussions or the research questions. Quizzes and exams were based on the lectures, PowerPoints, and textbook. If students read all three of those items, they saw the concepts three times. Feedback was provided if students requested it. He said that some students who did poorly on one exam, improved on the next exam. He said that at this point in their college career (as juniors or seniors), they knew how that worked.

Two of the three exams were proctored since the university covered the cost of two exams to be proctored using an online proctoring service. There was some confusion since the first exam was not proctored and students were not used to the proctoring process when they got to the second exam. He would have preferred to have all three exams proctored, but he did not want students to have to pay for the third exam. He provided instructions for using the proctoring service and required students to take the exam during a 48-hour time window. Some students did not like having to be proctored.

Even though the instructor took these measures, he did not believe cheating occurs more online. He said that students who want cheat will regardless of how the course is delivered. He also stated that he did not think student grades in proctored tests would differ significantly from non-proctored tests. In this semester, there were some reports from the proctoring service about students looking away from the screen, but no reports indicated cheating.

Questions about misunderstandings usually occurred regarding the exams. Students who were very focused on grades liked to discuss what they missed on the exam or quiz. He provided the author’s explanation from the test bank or his own explanation. If a student pressed further, he recommended that they research the question. Few students asked about questions when
reading; most questions were associated with either quizzes or exams, which covered material in the text and PowerPoint lecture.

In addition to answering questions about the exams, the instructor sent announcements. He contacted students who were inactive to encourage them to rejoin the course. He sent announcements weekly to check in with the students. He wanted to know how they were doing. Some students responded with comments about another course. He listened, but was clear that he did not want to know the instructor’s name. Some students were more open than he had expected, and he referred students to other services such as counseling if needed.

Technical support was available through the learning management system, and issues were usually resolved quickly. Even though the learning management system listed due dates, he sent additional reminders about major due dates. Sometimes students asked questions and admitted they had not read the syllabus. He thought the reminders were beneficial for some students and too much for other students. The speed at which he could communicate with students through email was helpful for communicating with online students. He also was available to meet with students during office hours or by appointment to discuss the course or their careers. He would have met with students virtually, but no one requested that option. He was concerned that he would not be able to provide enough attention to a large class of about 65, but he was pleasantly surprised.

When he first began teaching online, he was unsure of the ability of undergraduate students to be mature enough to succeed in online courses because of his own experience as an undergraduate student. He said that students now are different, and online courses are here to stay. Some students took online courses because of work or scheduling conflicts. Online students need to have initiative and discipline. He recommended that students in the future take a type of
aptitude test to determine if they would succeed in an online course or to observe an online course. It was helpful to him to observe an online course before teaching one.

**Course 9: Comparing Student and Instructor Perspectives**

The students and instructor noted that the course was well-organized. However, students also noted that the due dates were inconsistent. The instructor provided little feedback on the research tasks, and some students were frustrated by the lack of feedback since they had put forth effort into the assignment. The instructor indicated the research tasks were good for the students, but he placed more value on the quizzes and exams. The instructor checked in with students at least once a week. Most students appreciated the communication and that he cared about them. The instructor and students agreed that the reminders the instructor sent helped to keep students on track.

**Course 10: Student Perspective**

Course 10 was an upper-level business course. There were 30 responses from students in the IDEA surveys at the conclusion of the Fall 2017 semester. Three students completed the research survey. Students had an overall positive experience with this course. The instructor was responsive, helpful, and provided materials and examples the students found to be relevant. One student said this course was “challenging but informative.” One student mentioned that “this course was well planned.”

Course navigation instructions and information about technical support were provided in the course. The course was organized into weekly modules containing the material needed for that week which included module overviews, instructional materials, and assessment instructions. Students found this course to be easy to use and navigate. The organization of the course contributed to decreased stress. One student noted that the course organization helped
them to “learn to pay attention to the important material to not over study.” The consistency of the materials, assessments, and workload was appreciated. Students indicated that the way the instructor organized the course made the workload manageable, even for a student who thought they would be overwhelmed in the course. One student did, however, say that the workload was “somewhat tedious.”

The module schedule and assignment due dates were provided from the beginning and were consistent throughout the course. One student appreciated being able to complete course tasks when convenient for them and was slightly annoyed by the requirement to post on the discussion board on two different days. One student noted that the schedule “allowed a little downtime between modules, depending on how you took your test.” Knowing the dates ahead of time helped the course to run smoothly.

Students recognized the instructor’s knowledge of content and her effort in planning the course. They commented that the instructor

seems to understand the demands online students face vs. traditional students. She's realistic and focuses on actually teaching content rather than assigning “busy work” and “I think the instructor was well versed in the course and I would recommend her to other students.”

They liked that she provided a lot of current examples for each topic, which helped to “bring the subject into real life.” Students found the module mini-lecture videos to be easy to understand and useful. One student recommended having two videos per module rather than just one. The textbook, PowerPoint, how to use the learning management system, and syllabus were also helpful to students. The use of publisher activities in the course helped one student to “learn to read the important information by not over reading.” Another student agreed that the textbook publisher online learning activity “is an awesome way to learn this information.” The instructor also “provided extra links, information, and advice to help you understand the information.”
Different types of assessments were used, which helped at least one student to better understand the terminology used in the course. The instructions in the modules were clear and easy to follow so that students knew what was expected of them in order to successfully complete the assessments and when they were due. The study guides were helpful in preparing for the exams and quizzes. However, other students were not pleased with these assessments. A student thought that 10 chapters were too many to cover on a single exam and made studying the exam stressful. One student commented the amount of time provided for students to take quizzes was too short. This student also felt that having to be proctored using the online proctoring service was an unnecessary invasion of privacy and conflicted with their work schedule. They noted that “online classes are taken to be more convenient and [the online proctoring service] was not.”

The instructor was clear in her expectations for the discussion board activities and told the students what “to implement from [the] reading into the discussion questions.” Students appreciated that the discussions were based on current events and that the instructor also contributed her opinion and deeper explanations to the discussion. She also included information on the discussion topics in her lecture videos. However, some students found the discussions to not be valuable. One student explained that “it seemed like a lot of people did them last minute.”

The instructor returned grades and feedback in a timely manner. Some of the feedback on assessments was clear and helpful. However, some students “would have liked more individualized feedback.” The online textbook publisher activities also provided feedback that explained why an answer was incorrect. A couple of students found the grading for the discussion board to be strict, but they found the feedback the instructor provided to be beneficial.
Providing feedback in a timely manner allowed students the opportunity to make changes and implement the feedback to do better in the class going forward.

As one student explained,

being to have hindsight of what you should have done, said, or answered is always helpful to learn. - It shows that the teacher actually pays attention to your work to ensure everyone is understanding the material. Makes me feel like I do not just do all the work to not learn or to know if I am understanding the material or not.

Students were pleased with communication in the course. One student noted that the instructor “was on top of communication all the time, so things were resolved quickly if you did have an issue.” The instructor sent weekly reminders about due dates and module requirements. The reminders were noted by one student as helping them to stay on track and made the course less stressful. Another student said that they kept up with due dates on their own.

In addition to weekly reminders, the instructor communicated with students through email, weekly Q&A sessions, office hours, and assessment feedback. Students appreciated that she was responsive, helpful, and was good at providing useful information. Where there were misunderstandings, she addressed them by “allowing people to have an open discussion” and provided additional links to articles. When there was a grading issue, it was resolved quickly, which increased the satisfaction of that student. Another student noted that “she is always willing to help her students in [every] possible way, whether it's course material or school related things, she provides assistance her students.”

While one student would have preferred to take the course in person, students seemed to have an overall positive experience with this class. They commented that they enjoyed the class, found the class to be interesting, and learned. One student stated. “Thank you for a once in a lifetime experience!” and another said, “The course and instructor exceeded my expectations. I
wasn't aware of the importance of marketing and did not expect to learn so much. The instructor
and course were excellent.”

Course 10: Instructor Perspective

The instructor had initially designed the course at a previous institution and taught it for
several years there and at the current institution. This was, however, the first semester this course
was taught after being redeveloped with her instructional designer for the 14-week semester. She
noted that instructional design says a course should be fully developed before teaching it, but
courses change. They are never completely done. This was the first time she used recorded
lectures and the publisher resource. Using new resources provided some obstacles, but overall
the course went well.

The course was organized into six modules so that her 7-week and 14-week courses were
consistent in design. Each module had multiple chapters. There was a consistent design for each
module which included one recorded video, textbook readings, a PowerPoint file, exercises in
the publisher website, homework or learning activities, and the quiz. The one thing that was not
consistent was the discussion. There were only discussions in some modules, the ones with fewer
chapters. She did not want to overwhelm the students with too heavy a workload. This
organization seemed to make sense so the students could learn the material and then apply the
concepts.

Instructions for navigating the learning management system were included in a welcome
email. She did not provide a recorded course tour because she thought her students did not need
it. The consistency of the course provided for ease of navigation. She did, however, provide
information on how to use the publisher website. If students had technical issues, they could
have contacted the learning management system or publisher technical support.
Detailed instructions were provided in the syllabus and in each module. Each module included an overview explaining how the chapter connected with the module concepts, the chapter readings that could be read online or in print, and the module video that was about 7 minutes long. The videos were recorded after she taught the on-campus course so that she could identify areas where students struggled to understand the material. The videos included stories, examples, and explanations of concepts. She received feedback from students that they liked the videos, so she is planning to create more.

Since the modules were so consistent, the instructions were pretty much the same in each module. The instructor thought the students might have just read them for the first module. The instructions in each discussion included generic logistical instructions and a unique discussion prompt. The instructor posted welcome messages at the beginning and current events during each module. She monitored activity in the publisher website. She also communicated with students through the learning management system mail. The instructor did not participate in the discussions since she had a grader who graded the discussions. She is considering changing that in the future.

The schedule and announcements were really important in helping the course run smoothly. She re-used announcements from previous semesters and made sure those were sent at the right time. She also added entries to the learning management calendar for the initial post due date for the discussion board. With modules that were 2 weeks long, it helped to have things pushing the students forward.

The instructor sent weekly announcements to help students progress. She sent a welcome announcement about the module and any updates. The 2nd week of the module, she made another announcement at a random time. She wanted it to seem like she was just popping in.
These were called Food for Thought and provided information related to the course and a current event or something specific to that time of year or upcoming holiday.

She could not see some parts of the publisher site to be able to research problems. There was an issue that occurred with multiple students. When an issue occurred for one student, she assumed it was an issue with their computer. During this semester, an issue happened to multiple students, so she became suspicious. She looked at the assignment and investigated the issue. The publisher site was not grading the activity correctly, so she gave the students credit for that question. She is still “fairly happy” with the site, though. She tried to be understanding of these issues and found that most of the time there was a good outcome.

If students asked for extensions that she could not grant, she explained that information was in the syllabus and it would not be fair to other students. She tried to word it in an understanding way. This seemed to work because students usually said thank you. She tried to balance adhering to the course policies, being fair to all students, and being flexible depending on the student’s situation. Since many students also had jobs and families it could be overwhelming. She said that “without the announcements and reminders, that would be sort of stale.” The announcements were intended to catch students’ attention.

The instructor answered student questions through the learning management system (LMS) mail and not through her regular university email. It was easier to keep track of student emails in the LMS mail. If they did email her there, she politely asked them to send it to the LMS mail. They usually did so quickly and she responded quickly. If there was a misunderstanding, she reviewed the course to see if that information could have been clarified or if she made an error. If it was clearly stated, she told them where it was stated in the course. She often used the word “unfortunate.” For example, “It’s unfortunate that you, you know, misunderstood this part.
It’s stated here in the syllabus.” She also encouraged the students to keep track of the information.

The instructor was available for telephone meetings, virtual meetings, or in-person meetings. She gave students her cell phone number for emergencies, but they rarely used it. She did not have scheduled office hours. She talked with some students about internships or study abroad. She tried to be accessible by phone, especially around exam time. Calls during exam time were about the proctoring service, either from the student or a proctor. During that semester, one of her students was in the military and stationed on a ship. There was not a way to prove where he was; she decided to trust him. The proctoring service did not want to allow him to take the test because there were other people in the testing room. She allowed him to take the test without a proctor. That was not a situation she had previously considered. The test was timed and the questions appeared one at a time in a random order, so she felt ok with him taking the test without a proctor. She had another student who did not like the idea of being proctored but was turned down by the disability support office for an accommodation. The instructor let the student come to her office to take the exam.

Students were in groups of 10 to 13 for the discussions to provide a better experience. The instructor purposely grouped students who were in an online degree program together because she thought they might have good discussions. She read some of the discussion posts, but not all of them. She did not participate in the discussions. She said that she may in the future. The instructor and her grader provided feedback for the discussions. They had a shared document with common responses so that feedback would be consistent. Some students posted comments in the grading feedback to which the instructor responded. The activities in the publisher website also provided feedback to help students understand the correct answer.
The instructor was happy with how the course went. However, she said that courses change each semester. She already had a list of ideas for improving the course in the future including participating in the discussions and providing more videos.

**Course 10: Comparing Student and Instructor Perspectives**

Students and the instructor for Course 10 agreed on many aspects. They both indicated the course was well-organized and consistent. Dates were consistent throughout the course. The instructor was responsive to students and incorporated relevant information and examples. Feedback was provided for assessments. However, some students stated they would have liked for the instructor to provide more individualized feedback on assignments.

**Major Themes Across Courses**

Throughout the analysis of the study results, a few themes appeared across courses with students and instructors. These included clear and consistent course organization, responsive and proactive communication, fair grading and helpful feedback, academic integrity, selection and relevance of course materials, instructor cares about the students, technology issues, and attitudes toward online learning.

**Theme 1: Clear and Consistent Organization**

All of the instructors interviewed organized their courses into modules with consistent formats and most provided course schedules. Some mentioned that this helps students to stay on track. Students in multiple courses commented that their course was well-organized and easy to navigate. There was one course where students commented that the course was unstructured and difficult to navigate, however, the instructor had organized it into modules.

Students appreciated having a consistent schedule. One student mentioned the schedule made the course load manageable. A couple of instructors also mentioned the importance of not
making changes to deadlines or the course during the semester as that would create stress for students. Instructor Eight said that poor organization could create barriers, and Instructor Six discussed how good navigation allows students to focus on the course content.

**Theme 2: Responsive and Proactive Communication**

Students and instructors both valued communication in the course and used multiple methods of communication. As Instructor Three stated, there are enough communication tools available. All instructors sent various reminders either through announcements, email, or the learning management system mail. Several instructors sent reminders for upcoming due dates, and many students appreciated that they helped them to stay on track. Some instructors hosted virtual meetings. Some instructors were active in the discussion board conversations. Some instructors reached out individually to students who were inactive in the course, and this sometimes motivated students to join the course.

Several instructors mentioned that students did not reach out to them or participate in the virtual meetings while students noted when instructors were or were not responsive to their inquiries. Students noted and appreciated when instructors were timely in their responses to questions. Some students also mentioned whether instructors participated in the discussion board and liked seeing the instructor’s participation. Multiple instructors said that they participated in the discussions but did not respond to every student so as to not take over the conversation.

**Theme 3: Fair Grading and Helpful Feedback**

There were varying levels of feedback given by instructors. Instructors said that they provided feedback on some assignments and not others. Some assignments such as quizzes gave a score or correct answer without an explanation. Some instructors said they provided more of an explanation if a student asked for it. Some instructors graded each discussion while others did
not. Some instructors used rubrics for various assignments. Instructors who did provide individual feedback on assignments hope that it was helpful to students.

Students were more specific in their experience with grading and feedback. They wanted clear expectations, clear grading criteria, and detailed feedback. In one course, the grading criteria for some assignments was unclear and inconsistent. In another course, not all discussions were graded and students felt the weight of the ones that were graded was too heavy. Several students expressed wanting more feedback or more detailed feedback on assignments. A couple of students also stated that they needed to receive the feedback in enough time to use it in subsequent assignments or to make a decision about dropping the course.

**Theme 4: Academic Integrity**

A couple of instructors used an online proctoring service to monitor exams, but other instructors did not mention academic integrity. Some instructors used project or application-based assignments rather than tests. Instructor Nine required online proctoring, but also stated that he thinks cheating online is about the same as cheating on campus. If a student wants to cheat, they will. Students in one class mentioned that they appreciated not having to use the online proctoring service because that showed the instructor saw them as adults. In a similar vein, students noted in a couple of courses that their instructor was knowledgeable in the course content. In one course, students questioned why the instructor was allowed to teach since he did not seem to be qualified.

**Theme 5: Selection and Relevance of Course Materials**

Content was presented in multiple ways, with many courses using a textbook, readings, and videos. Some instructors used videos recorded by the previous instructor while other instructors recorded their own videos. A couple of instructors recorded using a web-conference
tool so students could watch live or later. Students found many of the lecture videos to be helpful. In one course, the web-conference was not found to be helpful because it was repeating information from another video or instructions. In one course, students found the lectures to be difficult to understand, and the textbook was more helpful. Instructor Three stated that his text was good but was becoming outdated.

Multiple instructors made a point to incorporate relevant examples, cases, or current events. In some of these courses, students noticed and appreciated studying relevant material. In one course, students wanted more relevant examples. Instructor Three said that it is difficult to bring in current events during the semester, while Instructor Nine said that the students bring current events in the discussions on their own. The instructor in Course Seven said that students were not active in the current events discussion board, but students noted how the instructor kept the course relevant. As one student said, the instructor was an “inspirational instructor who knows how to keep this course interesting, relevant, and contemporary.”

Students in Course Ten also appreciated that the examples used throughout the course were based on events that were happening during that semester. Having real-life examples helped to bring the course content to life. Students also stated when they felt activities were not relevant or the course contained busywork.

**Theme 6: Instructor Cares About the Students**

It was clear from participants that instructors cared about their students and course. Instructors Eight and Ten discussed the importance of being flexible with students and making adjustments as needed. Multiple instructors such as Instructor Six reached out to students who had been inactive in the course to encourage them to continue in the course. Instructor Nine sent out a weekly note asking how students were doing. His students commented on how he cared
about the students. A student in Course Six stated that his instructor caring made him care. There was one class, however, where a student felt like the “class was an afterthought to the professor since we were online.” Another student in the course said the instructor seemed like a “smart elic.” This instructor had mentioned that he was not a big proponent of online teaching. He was only teaching online because it was required.

There were a couple of courses where students said they would recommend the course to other students. In one such course, a student said they had been apprehensive about taking an online course, but the instructor had provided resources to help them to be successful. Students also noted that individualized feedback on assessments showed that they actually reviewed the work and cared about their success in the course.

Other instructors expressed concern about the students’ educational experience beyond their course. Instructors Three and Four noted how other instructors do things differently. Instructor Three said there was a lack of continuity between course sections. According to other instructors, many courses in their school used a similar module structure which could provide some consistency between courses. Instructor Nine noted that students should have to take a readiness test to help them decide if they should take an online course. Some instructors incorporated elements in their course that would be beneficial to the students’ careers such as professionalism or career exploration. Many were willing to discuss career and academic issues with students. One instructor expressed concern for the students’ ability to communicate professionally in writing.

Several instructors discussed ways to improve their courses in the future such as incorporating more videos, updating content, and being more active in the discussion boards. Updating courses can be difficult, however, when instructors are trying to stay up-to-date with
technology, content, and student preferences. Instructor Two said, “So every year, I become more out of touch with them.”

Several instructors said they did not know how specific things they did in the course affected students. Multiple instructors found working with an instructional designer helpful in building their course but wanted more training. Instructor Two wanted a way to be notified of updates to technology and student preferences. Instructor Three wanted to be able to collaborate and brainstorm ideas for the course to bring in the “wow factor.” He also explained that new adjunct instructors need training. When he started, he observed a course on campus and was surprised by the instructor just reading the text. He would have liked more training before teaching. He also thinks instructors need more support in doing clerical things that someone else could do.

**Theme 7: Technical Challenges**

In online courses, it may not be a surprise that technology played a role. Students and faculty alike encountered technical issues. Many instructors noted the availability of technical support through the learning management system, the campus, or the textbook publisher. Some instructors worked with instructional designers to develop their courses and/or solve technical issues. A couple of instructors mentioned not being aware of or trying to keep up with changes with the learning management system. Instructors One and Four worked with an instructional designer to figure out the logistics of assignments or other aspects of their course.

Several instructors said they did not provide information on how to navigate the learning management system because the students already knew how to use it. One instructor noted that traditional-aged students usually do not have technical questions. Some instructors said they did not have any questions about technology. There were only a few comments from students about
technical issues. One student mentioned the learning curve of navigating the learning management system added a layer of difficulty to the course. Most instructors deliberately organized their courses in a way to make them easier to navigate, and students noticed when courses were well-organized.

In a couple of courses, there were a few issues which were resolved easily with the instructor or technical support. Some instructors helped students with technical issues to a point while others directed them to technical support. There was one course, however, where the constant technical issues overshadowed the course experience. Students and the instructor were very frustrated. The instructor said that it was key to reach out to the publisher and instructional designer quickly and to respond to students in a timely manner. He knew that students would blame him and understood their reasoning and frustration.

**Theme 8: Attitude Toward Online Learning**

Instructors were proud of their courses and liked talking about the content. Some liked teaching online; others were apprehensive in the beginning. Instructor Three was unsure in the beginning but was becoming more comfortable teaching online. One instructor was and still is opposed to online courses. He sees them as “necessary evils.” Multiple instructors felt that there was a sense of communication that is lost with online courses. While most students appeared to be fine with online learning, a couple of students mentioned their course would have been better on campus. One said that it would be better to have hands-on experience with the content. One instructor said that some students felt like the instructor just turned the course on and off, and that is a problem. Most instructors mentioned updating their course, which shows that they do not just build the course once and teach it several semesters. Most instructors tweak their course
each semester. This takes time and support. Some instructors mentioned appreciating or wanting more support in developing or updating courses.

A couple of instructors mentioned that students choose online courses for the flexibility in their schedules. One instructor said some students have to take online courses because an on-campus version is not available. Some instructors think that some students are suited for online courses while other students need to attend class on campus. Instructor Eight indicated that some students need to attend class on campus to strengthen their communication skills.

Instructor Nine was also not sure about online courses before teaching them. He has seen since then that some undergraduate students are successful in online courses. He attributes this to their level of self-discipline. Multiple instructors agreed that online learning is here to stay. Instructor Nine said, “I’m just hoping that those of us who didn’t grow up in this environment will appreciate it.”

**Findings and Implications**

Many of the research findings have implications for practice and provide ideas for future research. The research findings align well with categories of instructor presence as described by Richardson et al. (2015) as seen in the table below.

**Summary**

Instructors and students shared their experiences and perspectives of online undergraduate courses in a university in the southeast. Experiences varied among courses, but there were some common threads. Instructors and students valued communication, relevant content, organization, and working technology. Instructors and students felt it was important for the instructors to care about the students and the course. Students also valued detailed and timely assessment feedback. In the following chapter, the research questions will be answered,
conclusions will be drawn, implications for practice will be discussed, and suggestions for further research will be presented.

Table 6

*Summary of Findings and Implications*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finding</th>
<th>Implication for Practice</th>
<th>Implication for Research</th>
<th>Theoretical Framework</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course organization helped students to easily navigate the course. Some instructors believe this may decrease student stress as well.</td>
<td>Instructional Designers (ID) and instructors can work together to build consistent courses. IDs or a university office can build consistency in course design across schools or university. A university office can provide a navigation tutorial for students.</td>
<td>Study of student perception of navigation in courses with organization consistent to their previous courses vs course with a different organization.</td>
<td>Organizing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consistency of due dates keep students on track.</td>
<td>Instructors should establish due dates that are consistent throughout the course.</td>
<td>Study student perceptions of courses with consistent due dates vs. courses with random due dates.</td>
<td>Organizing, Facilitating</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clear expectations and grading practices help students to understand requirements.</td>
<td>IDs can provide support for instructors to clarify instructions or build rubrics.</td>
<td>Compare student grades in courses with clear expectations and rubrics with courses with vague instructions.</td>
<td>Organizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students want constructive and timely feedback they can use to improve or make enrollment decisions.</td>
<td>A university office can provide training for providing effective feedback.</td>
<td>Study evaluating grades for students in courses with constructive vs. vague or no feedback.</td>
<td>Sense Making</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finding</td>
<td>Implication for Practice</td>
<td>Implication for Research</td>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students want relevant examples and cases and appreciate when materials tie to their careers.</td>
<td>Instructors can include examples and cases relevant to student careers and current events. A university office or IDs can provide support for instructors in updating courses periodically with current examples and cases.</td>
<td>Compare the level of student understanding with older vs. more current examples.</td>
<td>Sense Making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students appreciated instructors who were responsive and available.</td>
<td>Instructors should aim to be responsive to student communication.</td>
<td>Compare perceptions of instructor presence based on responsiveness of the instructor.</td>
<td>Advocating, Maintaining, Facilitating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructors sending reminders helped students to stay on track.</td>
<td>Instructors can send reminders throughout the course. IDs or the University office can provide examples of reminders.</td>
<td>Compare perceptions of instructor presence in courses where instructors send reminders at different rates (rarely, monthly, weekly) or by topic.</td>
<td>Advocating, Maintaining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some instructors use online proctoring because of academic integrity concerns. Some students appreciated not being proctored.</td>
<td>IDs can work with instructors to discuss proctoring as well as other measures for securing exams using the learning management exam features.</td>
<td>Compare performance of students in courses with tests that are proctored vs. those using other exam securing measures.</td>
<td>Organizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some instructors struggled to find a balance on discussion boards between being present and taking over.</td>
<td>IDs can provide best practices for facilitating discussions.</td>
<td>Compare student preferences for rate or level of involvement of instructor in discussions.</td>
<td>Facilitating</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finding</td>
<td>Implication for Practice</td>
<td>Implication for Research</td>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
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<td>Some instructors find keeping up with grading to be a challenge.</td>
<td>A university office can provide training for leveraging the learning management system to streamline grading. Schools can hire teaching assistants to help with grading as available.</td>
<td>Compare instructor perceptions of grading based on assessment type or use of teaching assistants.</td>
<td>Sense Making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructors did not provide technical support directly. They referred students to technical support. Technical issues were rare, but overshadowed the course when present.</td>
<td>Instructors provide technical support information to students.</td>
<td>Study student perceptions of technical support in courses.</td>
<td>Maintaining (via referral)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some instructors indicated a challenge with keeping up with technology and student preference changes.</td>
<td>A university office or IDs can provide training and updates for technology and student preference trends; a university office can provide training for updates to university supported technologies.</td>
<td>Evaluate instructor preferences for technology and pedagogy training.</td>
<td>Maintaining, Organizing (prep)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many instructors discussed possible ways to improve their courses for the next semester.</td>
<td>IDs can work with instructors as needed to improve their courses for subsequent semesters.</td>
<td>Study instructor perceptions of courses after improvements; compare student perceptions after various semesters to evaluate changes.</td>
<td>Maintaining, Organizing (prep)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding</td>
<td>Implication for Practice</td>
<td>Implication for Research</td>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
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<td>Students expressed appreciation when they thought the instructor cared about them and their success. Some instructors also noted they cared about the students.</td>
<td>Instructors can implement practices showing that they care about the students’ success such as reaching out to inactive students and asking students how they are doing in the course. IDs or the university office can encourage instructors to reach out to inactive students.</td>
<td>Compare student perceptions of instructor presence in courses where instructors reach out proactively and those where instructors do not.</td>
<td>Advocating</td>
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CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of students and instructors in online courses. Data were collected through individual instructor and student interviews, student surveys developed by the researcher, and student end-of-course (IDEA) surveys at a research university in the Southeast to gain a better understanding of how students and instructors experience and perceive instructor presence in online courses. Instructor presence includes many factors such as course design, development of course materials and activities, assessment design and feedback, and communication with students. One other aspect that appeared in this research is the instructor caring about the students.

Student and instructor experiences with these and other factors of instructor presence and how these factors are perceived to have affected the students’ experience will be discussed in this chapter by addressing each research question. Possible implications for teaching, designing courses, and other educational practices based on the findings of this research study will then be discussed. Recommendations for future research regarding instructor presence and online courses will be provided at the end of the chapter.

Discussion of Research Questions

The overarching research question for this study is: How do students and instructors perceive instructor presence in online courses? This question is broken down into eight sub-questions which are discussed below.
Research Question 1

Research Question 1 was *What are students’ experiences of instructor presence in online courses?* There were mixed reviews of instructors in online courses in this study, but there were more positive comments than negative. Feedback was given about various components of instructor presence identified in the study that served as the basis of the theoretical framework for the study (Richardson et al., 2015). These included clear and consistent course organization, responsive and proactive communication, fair grading and helpful feedback, academic integrity, selection and relevance of course materials, instructor cares about the students, technology issues, and attitudes toward online learning.

Consistent with Hung and Chou’s (2015) findings, course organization was valued by the students. Navigation and structure of courses were typically viewed positively. These courses were usually structured in consistent modules. Most students indicated that the courses were well-organized and appreciated that the courses were easy to navigate. Students also noted that the due dates followed a consistent schedule which aligns with the research of Bair and Bair (2011). In one course that had a lot of technical issues, students noted that the course seemed unstructured and that the instructor also seemed to be unfamiliar with how to navigate the course.

Multiple researchers of previous studies found that clear communication and responsiveness are important to students (Hodges & Cowan, 2012; Hung & Chou, 2015; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010). This study was no exception. Communication played a big role in the students’ experiences. One student said that a hands-on instructor is the key to a successful course. Responsiveness of the instructor was a very common topic. Major (2015) noted that response time varies among instructors. In some courses, students praised the responsiveness of the instructor and their availability to help students. In one course, students noted the instructor...
was not responsive. Richardson et al. (2016) found that instructors may be more harsh or formal in communication than others.

While most students were positive about instructors’ attitudes, there were a couple of negative comments. In one course, students noted the instructor responded but was not helpful and seemed to have a negative attitude. One student said this particular instructor seemed to treat the course as an afterthought. Most instructors were responsive and available. They clarified misunderstandings and were willing to help students. They sent reminders for due dates, exams, and other items which Bair and Bair (2011) found to be an important function of instructors. One instructor proactively checked in to see if students had any questions and how they were doing with the work, which showed that the instructor cared and was willing to help them.

Students in multiple courses mentioned having or wanting relevant materials, cases, and examples in courses. They noticed when cases were older and wanted to work with recent cases that could be applied in their future careers. They also appreciated when materials and examples were current. While relevance of course material to students’ careers or lives was not often discussed in the literature reviewed on instructor presence, Kennette and Redd (2015) attempted to connect materials to the students’ personal experiences in assessment feedback.

The students wanted fair grading and helpful feedback. Many students noted wanting feedback and some mentioned receiving and appreciating having effective feedback. Others stated that they wanted feedback they could use to improve, which was also seen in a study by Kupczynski et al. (2010). Students also noted when grading seemed arbitrary or unfair. For instance, one instructor only graded three discussion boards out of the semester. Students felt their grade suffered unfairly if they happened to do poorly on those three even if they did well on the other discussion assignments. The students’ desire for clear and timely feedback aligns with
previous studies on instructor presence (Fedynich et al., 2015; Hosler & Arend, 2012) and the Sense Making role described by Richardson et al. (2015) as providing constructive feedback and clarifying course topics. In one class, students appreciated not using the online proctoring system. Students did not mention any concerns about academic integrity.

**Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 was *What are instructors’ experiences of instructor presence in online courses?* Most of the instructors took great pride in discussing their courses. They enjoyed discussing the content. Some wanted to discuss other courses and had to be guided back to the course in the study. As discussed by Richardson et al. (2016), courses were organized into modules for ease of navigation and consistency. Many, but not all instructors worked with an instructional designer on the course design. Similarly, Seaton and Schwier (2014) found that instructional design support varies, and some instructors develop their courses on their own.

As Richardson et al. (2015) noted in the Organizing role, instructors choose the materials and organization for the course. In the current study, there were two exceptions: one instructor taught a course previously developed by another instructor and did not make changes, and one instructor taught a course previously developed by another instructor but changed a few resources. Several instructors worked to include relevant materials, cases, or current events in their courses. They chose the textbooks and the order in which to present the materials. They provided instructions for course activities and determined how to assess student learning. Some required proctoring of exams to prevent cheating and found that some students do not like to be proctored.

Instructors varied on their grading and feedback practices. Some participated in the discussion boards, and some tried to find a balance between being present in the discussions and
taking over. Seaton and Schwier (2014) also found that instructors struggle to find this balance and often participate in the discussion as a facilitator. Some instructors gave detailed feedback on assessments and some gave minimal feedback. An instructor with a large class found it difficult to keep up with grading during the 7-week course. Several instructors noted they tried to include both positive and constructive feedback, although one said it was sometimes difficult to provide both.

According to Richardson et al. (2015), the role of Facilitating an online course includes communicating with students. Instructors used multiple forms of communication including announcements, email, learning management system mail, text messages, and web-conferences. Two instructors gave students their personal cell phone numbers. Most instructors sent reminders for assignments, upcoming due dates, and items. Instructors answered emails from students. Multiple instructors said that students did not come to them for content questions. Most questions were about course logistics, the tests, exceptions, or technology issues.

In previous research (Anderson, 2010; Bair & Bair, 2015; Richardson et al., 2015), instructors often served as technical support for students in some capacity. In the current study, most instructors provided technical support contact information, but usually did not provide technical support themselves. While Anderson (2010) found that technical support varies, all of the instructors and students in this study had access to technical support through the university technical support office and the learning management system technical support.

Richardson et al. (2015) noted that instructors also provide navigation instructions for students. That was not the case for most of the instructors in this study. Instructors assumed students knew how to use the system. This assumption was supported by the few or lack of complaints they received. In one course, however, technology presented a great barrier to
learning. Multiple technical issues prevented students from accessing and completing course activities. The instructor felt overwhelmed and worked to fix the issues.

Instructors cared about the students, their experiences in the course, and their future careers. Several instructors were available to discuss career concerns with students, which was discussed as part of the Advocate role in research by Richardson et al. (2016). Most instructors were already planning ways to improve their courses for the next semester. Some instructors faced challenges in this area. They were unsure of what students wanted or the impact of their teaching practices on students. Some had trouble keeping up with changes in technology and student preferences. They would like more support from the school or university for keeping up with these changes and updating their courses.

**Research Question 3**

Research Question 3 was *What are the similarities and differences between student and instructor experiences of instructor presence in online courses?* Instructors and students felt that the course organization, clear instructions, and communication were important. Most considered the courses well-organized and easy to navigate. Instructors and students agreed that reminders were sent often. Instructors noted that students did not come to them often with content questions and did not attend virtual meetings. Students commented more on the reminders and instructor responsiveness to emails.

While instructors said they provided feedback, some students wanted more detailed feedback. Instructors did not provide feedback on some assessments. One instructor explained why she did not grade all of the discussions, and one instructor graded discussions for an F or an A. Students found these practices unfair. Some instructors purposely limited their involvement in the discussions, but students liked seeing the instructor participating.
In the course where there were many technical issues, the instructor stated he tried to keep the students informed, worked on the course every day, and collaborated with the publisher and tech support. The students, however, did not see this. They saw the instructor as not being responsive to them and not taking responsibility for the technical issues.

**Research Question 4**

Research Question 4 was *How do students perceive factors of instructor presence affecting their online course experience?* Organization and consistent structure of courses helped students to “understand when to have assignments done” and was good “for those who have busy schedules.” However, when an assignment was open for only 1 day, it presented an issue since that required students’ rearranging their schedules each week. Clear instructions provided students with all of the information they needed for the course. Students in one course said that since everything they needed was clearly laid out in the module, they did not need to contact their instructor. Lecture videos, relevant content, and examples helped students to better understand the concepts.

As noted by Bair and Bair (2011), it is helpful for instructors to send reminders. Reminders sent by instructors helped students to stay on track and be informed of course changes. Quick responses to questions were helpful to students. One student noted that there is an “electronic wall” in an online course that can make students shy about reaching out to the instructor. When instructors reach out to students, they help to break down that wall. Similarly, Richardson et al. (2016) found that students were more likely to reach out to the instructor when the instructor was less formal in communication.

Feedback on assignments showed that the instructor cared and actually reviewed their work. One student noted, the instructor “was thorough in his grading and feedback so you always
knew where you could do better or where you did really well.” This greatly affected the student’s satisfaction in the course. “I was impressed that he took the time to read every document we submitted and provide such great, detailed feedback.”

The lack of clear (or any) feedback prevented students from knowing how to improve their performance on subsequent assignments. Additionally, when grades or feedback were not provided prior to the last day to drop a course, the students were unable to make an informed decision on whether or not they should continue in the course. Grading of group projects sometimes negatively affected students’ grades when their grades were dependent on another team member to submit the assignment. One instructor’s policy of having students hold each other accountable by removing the names of students who did not participate, put students in a position of dealing with the backlash from those students.

Technical issues were rampant in one course and became the focus of the majority of the comments on that course. The students in that course felt the instructor was ignoring them and passing the responsibility of the technical issues off to other people. The frustration that this experience caused the students came through in their comments.

Previous research did not really discuss instructors caring about the students and how that might affect students’ attitudes or performance in an online course. However, Richardson et al. (2015), did discuss how the Instructor’s Persona could affect students. The Instructor Persona is how instructors present themselves to students and communicate with students (Richardson et al., 2015). The instructor’s persona could indicate to students if the instructor cares about the students and/or course. The attitude of the instructor regarding how much the instructor cared was mentioned in multiple courses in this study. Several students mentioned how much their instructor cared for the students. One noted that they (the student) cared more about the course as
a result of seeing how much the instructor cared. Another student said it was better knowing the instructor cared.

**Research Question 5**

Research Question 5 was *How do instructors perceive factors of instructor presence affecting the students’ online course experience?* Multiple instructors said they did not know how their actions or involvement affected the students. Several thought consistent due dates and sending reminders helped students to stay on track. Instructions helped students to understand expectations. The course organization helped students to navigate the course and decrease the stress of trying to figure out where to find things. A couple of instructors provided their cell phone numbers to try to provide a means of communication they thought students preferred. When instructors provided feedback, they hoped it was helpful to students in knowing what was good and what could be improved.

Some instructors reached out to students who were not active or to the class to check in. Others responded to students individually in discussions. Many instructors were open to discussing career plans. All of these instructors hoped the personal communication would show the students that the instructor cared about their success. Instructors felt that reaching out, sending reminders and other announcements, and incorporating current events would help to engage students in the course. This correlates with the research by Armstrong (2011) and Richardson et al. (2016), which indicated that increased instructor engagement may lead to increased student engagement.

Many instructors did not think that technology affected students since students used the technology easily. However, in the course where there were many technological issues, the instructor said the students were frustrated and negatively affected. Armstrong (2011) found that
technology can confuse students if not implemented well. This was definitely the case for Course Three where technical issues overshadowed the rest of the course.

**Research Question 6**

Research Question 6 was *What are similarities and differences between the instructor and student perceptions on how instructor presence affects the students’ experience in online courses?* There were many similarities between the student and instructor perspectives of the effects of instructor presence even though some instructors were unsure of the effects of their actions on the students. Other instructors believed or hoped that the announcements and reminders helped the students to stay on track, and students concurred. In the course with many technical issues, the instructor noted that those issues negatively affected the students’ experience in the course.

Several instructors and students indicated that reminders and other communication are vital for students to do well in online courses. One instructor also said providing technical and navigational support is important for students’ success. “I think with the online students they need to know that the support is there for them.” In line with this idea, students often noted when they felt the instructor cared about their success. Some instructors used web-conferences, but students did not seem to value this communication. Students were more concerned about their emails being answered.

Another difference between the groups was on assessment feedback. Some instructors provided detailed feedback and hoped that it would be helpful. They were often not specific on how it was helpful. However, other instructors provided minimal feedback or said they would provide feedback if the student asked for it. Several students wanted more feedback or more detailed feedback so they could improve on subsequent assessments. This also required the
feedback to be returned in a timely manner. On the instructor side, the factor of the timeliness of feedback was not discussed by many instructors. Another reason feedback should be provided in a timely manner was so students would have time to decide if they wanted to remain in the course or drop the course.

**Research Question 7**

Research Question 7 was *How do instructors of different disciplines perceive instructor presence?* The instructors that participated in this study included those who teach in the business and health-related fields. One notable difference between the two disciplines in the design of the courses is that the business instructors created content solely for the online course while the health-related course recorded the lectures given to the face-to-face course. Instructors in both disciplines provided instructions and learning materials.

Many instructors across both disciplines also strove to be responsive to students. While, the instructor in the health-related field sent some announcements, she said that most of the interaction with students occurred when students reached out to her. In contrast, several of the business instructors took a more proactive approach. In addition to sending reminders, many business instructors sent emails to students who had not participated in the course, emails to check in with all students, messages to provide additional articles, and/or participated in discussion boards.

Additionally, the health-related course assessments were designed to be automatically graded by the learning management system with the instructor providing feedback to individual students by request. The business courses included some assessments that were automatically graded and some assessments such as projects or papers, that were graded manually by the instructor or teaching assistant.
Research Question 8

Research Question 8 was *How do students in different disciplines perceive instructor presence?* The students who participated in this study included those taking courses in business and health-related fields. While there were data from multiple courses in business fields, there were limited data from students in the health-related fields. Students in both fields appreciated relevant and helpful instructional materials. Instructional videos were valued, however, some students in the health-related course found the videos to be difficult to understand.

Students across both disciplines also valued responsiveness and communication with the instructor. Many students in business courses appreciated or wanted detailed feedback, and students in the health-related course did not comment on assessment feedback provided in the course. The health-related course contained assessments that were automatically graded. It is possible that the feedback provided was sufficient while the manually graded papers, projects, or discussions in the other courses warranted additional feedback.

**Findings and the Theoretical Framework**

This research study was framed by the Community of Inquiry indicators of Teaching Presence (Anderson et. al, 2001) which include facilitating discourse, direct instruction, and design and organization. These indicators were further categorized and expanded upon by Richardson et al. (2015). Richardson et al. (2015) organized the roles of instructor presence into the following categories: Organizing, Facilitating, Sense Making, Advocating, and Maintaining. As shown previously in Table 2, these categories align with the elements of the Community of Inquiry Teaching Presence. For example, the Community of Inquiry framework includes presenting content and responding to technical questions in the Direct Instruction category while
Richardson et al. (2015) splits these between the Sense Making and Maintaining roles, respectively.

All of these elements discussed in the Community of Inquiry (2001) and Richardson et al.'s (2015) description of Teaching Presence were present in the courses studied. In the area of Organizing, instructors organized the course, set schedules, provided instructions and activities, and provided proctoring instructions. In Facilitating the course, instructors set due dates and managed discussion boards. Sense Making included providing feedback on assessments as well as relevant examples and cases to assist with understanding materials. In some courses, students wanted more feedback or more relevant examples. Some instructors found keeping up with grading to be a challenge. Being responsive and available to students is in line with the categories of Advocating, Maintaining, and Facilitating. Sending reminders that help students stay on track fit into the categories of Advocating and Maintaining. Richardson et al. (2015) emphasized the Advocating role of instructors more so than does the Community of Inquiry (Anderson et al., 2001). It was found in this study that many instructors spend time advocating for their students. Instructors Advocated for students by reaching out to students who were inactive in the course and encouraging them to rejoin the course or by asking students how they were doing in the course (Richardson et al. 2015).

The category of Maintaining (Richardson et al., 2015) and the Community of Inquiry Teaching Presence indicators in Direct Instruction (Anderson et al., 2001) includes the instructor providing technical support. In these courses, the instructors did not provide that support directly. They referred students to the university, publisher, or learning management system support. This may be an indication that technical support is often not the responsibility of the instructor so may not necessarily be a part of instructor presence. However, in the one course where students did
experience a number of technical issues, it did affect how the students felt about the instructor. The categories of Maintaining and Organizing continue beyond the course with the instructors making changes for subsequent semesters or trying to keep up with technology or learner preference changes (Richardson et al., 2015).

**Implications of Research Findings**

The findings from this research study were reviewed to identify potential implications for practice in online courses in higher education. These ideas could be implemented by instructors, instructional designers, eLearning departments, or administration to improve the online course experience for students and instructors.

**Structure and Navigation**

As noted by Richardson et al. (2015), the instructor organizes the course. Students noted whether courses were easy to navigate or well-organized or difficult to navigate. As was noted in this study, learning how to use the learning management system added another layer of learning to the course. One student even suggested having more consistency among courses in terms of the learning management system. Building in consistency in structure among courses within a school or university may help students to better navigate courses and allow them to focus more on the course content. To accomplish this type of consistency, instructor and instructional designers could work together to develop a course template for all courses within a school or university. Additionally, instructors should schedule due dates consistently throughout the semester to provide consistency in courses.

Richardson et al. (2015) noted that instructors or an eLearning office could provide training for students on how to navigate and use the learning management system prior to the beginning of the course. This would allow students to become familiar with the learning management system before they need to focus on the course content.
Communication

Instructors and students in this study clearly showed that communication, both responsive and proactive, were important and showed that the instructors cared about the students. There are many tools that can be used to communicate, but the most common were announcements or email reminders. Instructors should aim to be responsive to student communication and reach out to students who are not active in the course. Instructional designers or the university office could be given examples of announcement or reminder topics such as reminders for deadlines and major assessments, to incorporate current events, to communicate course changes, or to just check in. Instructors could also be encouraged to reach out to students who are not active in the course.

Relevance of Course Materials

As part of Sense Making, it is the instructor’s role to help students learn the course material and this can be done in different ways (Richardson et al., 2015). Students appreciated when current events were included and materials seemed relevant. Some students even said they had used something they learned in the course in their jobs. Instructors can replace articles or cases each year or semester to keep information up to date. They could work with instructional designers to make the changes in the course if needed. The elearning office or instructional designers could provide training and support for instructors in finding current resources and updating their courses. Instructors could also collaborate with other instructors in their department or instructional designers to determine how to connect course materials to current events.

Grading and Feedback

Consistent with previous research (Fedynich et al., 2015; Hosler & Arend, 2012; Richardson et al., 2015), grading and feedback were important for students to know how they did
and where they could improve, and some students wanted more feedback. In most courses, that included assessments requiring manual grading (projects, papers, discussions, etc.) rather than automatic grading (multiple choice tests, fill in the blank assignments, etc.), students expressed the desire for more personalized and timely feedback. Some students indicated that it was important for feedback to be provided in enough time for them to use it to improve subsequent assignments or to decide whether or not to drop the course. Some instructors did not provide additional feedback because of the time involved. The university office could provide training on how to leverage the learning management system to make grading more efficient. They can work with instructional designers to create more effective rubrics or discuss how to provide better feedback. Instructional designers can provide best practices for facilitating discussion boards. If budgets allow, teaching assistants could be employed to help instructors provide personalized feedback for courses with large enrollments. For those concerned with academic integrity, instructional designers can work with instructors to discuss proctoring as well as other measures for securing exams using the learning management exam features.

**Technology**

Instructors should provide technical support information to students, such as the phone number for technical support. The university office or school can provide a navigation tutorial for students for basic navigation of the learning management system.

**Instructor Support**

Some instructors mentioned wanting to or struggling with keeping up with changes in technology and learner preferences. Instructional designers or a university elearning office could assist with this. They could provide updates when the university supported technologies are updated or features are changed. They could also provide training on learner preference trends they see at the university or school level. If students complete the student surveys at the end of
each semester, instructors can review them on their own or with an instructional designer and
determine how to incorporate the feedback to improve their courses. One instructor said that he
valued the help of the instructional designer, but the school needed to have more than one.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study explored the perspectives of instructors and students in 10 undergraduate
courses at one public research university in the Southeast. Additional research in various areas
would be beneficial in further understanding the instructor and student experiences and
perspectives in online courses, the role that instructors play in online courses, and how the
instructors’ actions affect the students’ experience and success. Suggestions for further research
studies are provided below based on the findings as well as different study parameters.

**Organization and Consistency**

Consistent organization and due dates were valued by students. Researchers could study
student perceptions of navigation in courses with organization consistent to their previous
courses vs. courses with a different organization. Another study could review students’
perceptions of courses with consistent vs. random due dates.

**Grading and Expectations**

Researchers could compare student grades in courses with clear expectations and rubrics
vs. courses with vague instructions. Grades for students in courses with constructive vs. vague or
no feedback could be evaluated. Perceptions of constructive feedback could be evaluated to
determine the level of detail of type of feedback wanted by students. A study could compare
performance of students in courses with tests that are proctored vs. those using other exam
securing measures. Instructor perceptions of grading load could be compared based on
assessment type or use of teaching assistants
Relevant Materials

Students in this study appreciated examples that were current or were relevant to their careers. A study could compare the level of understanding of students in scenarios with older or more current examples or with directly relevant or more abstract examples.

Communication

Communication played a major role in all of the courses in the study. Future studies could research students’ perceptions of instructor presence based on the responsiveness of the instructors. Other studies could explore rate or types of reminders sent to students or the level of involvement of instructors in discussions. A comparison of student perceptions of instructor presence in courses where instructors reach out proactively and those where instructors do not could be conducted.

Technology and Instructor Support

Students and instructors need support regarding technology. Studies could evaluate student perceptions of technical support in online courses and the instructor’s role in technical support. Researchers interested in instructor support could review instructor preferences or needs for technology and pedagogy training. Many instructors make changes to their courses each semester, so a study of the course over several semesters could evaluate those changes.

Discipline of Course

Participants in this study were from business and health-related courses. Further research could include studies in which instructor and student perspectives are compared in additional courses or disciplines. Additional studies of the disciplines in this study would provide deeper insight into the experience of students and instructors. Studies in other disciplines could be
compared to identify possible differences based on discipline or to provide a more comprehensive view of the experience with factors of instructor presence in online courses.

**Timing of Study**

This study occurred during the semester after the participants completed the course, so participants who completed interviews were about 3-4 months removed from the course. Future studies could be implemented at the immediate conclusion of the course to minimize participants’ not remembering or misremembering information. Another option is for the interview to be given at the mid-point of the semester as well as the end of the semester. In this type of study, the instructors would have an opportunity to adjust their practices after reflecting on their involvement in the class. After answering questions about instructor presence at the mid-point, students may be more aware of the instructor’s presence and better able to provide details of the instructor’s involvement and effects of that involvement at the end of the semester.

**Student Experience**

Studies with a greater number of student participants could further deepen the understanding of students’ experiences of instructor presence in online courses. Future studies could also be conducted to find differences within student populations based on school standing (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior) or between graduate and undergraduate students. Groups of students could be compared based on the degree of previous experience with online courses. A study could also be conducted to compare the experiences of students who choose to take classes online and those who must take them online due to scheduling conflicts or other reasons beyond their control.

More in-depth case studies using focus groups or multiple rounds of interviews could provide more insight into the student experience. Multiple rounds of interviews would provide
the research time to develop questions based on the initial interviews. This could be single-case studies or multi-case studies across disciplines. Identifying differences among different types of students may help faculty and instructional designers to tailor aspects of courses to the intended audience.

**Instructor Experience**

The instructor experience in providing presence in online courses can be furthered studied by researching differences in instructor presence by the level of teaching experience, level of online teaching experience, and level of experience as an online student. It might be interesting to see if having been an online student has an effect on how instructors interact when they become the instructor of an online course. Additionally, more in-depth case studies using multiple rounds of interviews could provide deeper insight on the instructor experience. This could be in form of multi-case studies, single-case studies, or a more in-depth phenomenological study with a few participants.

**Other Perspectives**

This study focused on the perspectives of undergraduate students and instructors. Future studies could also incorporate graduate students at the masters and doctoral levels. Other stakeholders such as instructional designers and administrators could be studied as well. The perspectives and expectations of instructor presence from the student, instructor, instructional designer, and administrator could then be compared.

**Conclusion**

This research study focused on the perspectives of instructor presence as shared by students and instructors in online undergraduate courses at a public university in the southeastern United States. Perspectives of students and instructors were reviewed and compared. Students
and instructors agreed that instructor presence affects students, and timely communication was the key to success. Ideas for practical implications drawn from the study included encouraging organization and consistency within courses, proactive and responsive communication, and providing training and support for online instructors. Recommendations for future studies in other disciplines and populations or using other methods were provided.
REFERENCES


Anderson, M. (2010). What’s it like to teach an online class? MultiMedia & Internet @ Schools, 17(6), 20-23.


Sheridan, K., & Kelly, M. (2010). The indicators of instructor presence that are important to students in online courses. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching* 6(4), 767-779.


APPENDIX A

UA IRB APPROVAL LETTER
January 11, 2018

Randi Kirkland
ELPTS
College of Education
Box 870302

Re: IRB#: 18-OR-012 “Instructor Presence in Online Courses: A Qualitative Study of Student and Instructor Perspectives”

Dear Randi Kirkland

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies

Your application will expire on January 9, 2019. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the IRB Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent form to provide to your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,
APPENDIX B

UAB IRB APPROVAL LETTER
TO: Kirkland, Randi

FROM: University of Alabama at Birmingham Institutional Review Board
        Federalwide Assurance # FWA00005960
        IORG Registration # IRB00000196 (IRB 01)
        IORG Registration # IRB00000726 (IRB 02)

DATE: 14-Dec-2017

RE: IRB-300000884
    Instructor Presence in Online Courses: A Qualitative Study of Student and Instructor Perspectives

The IRB reviewed and approved the Initial Application submitted on 12-Dec-2017 for the above referenced project. The review was conducted in accordance with UAB’s Assurance of Compliance approved by the Department of Health and Human Services.

Type of Review: Exempt (Category 1)
Determination: Exempt
Approval Date: 14-Dec-2017
Approval Period: No Continuing Review

Documents Included in Review:

- interview.171113
- exempt.171117
- focusgroup.171113
- consent_student.171203
- consent_instructor.171203
March 8, 2018

Randi Kirkland
Department of ELPTS
College of Education
The University of Alabama
Box 870302

Re: IRB # 18-OR-012-A “Instructor Presence in Online Courses: A Qualitative Study of Student and Instructor Perspectives”

Dear Ms. Kirkland:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has reviewed the revision to your previously approved expedited protocol. The board has approved the change in your protocol.

Please remember that your protocol will expire on January 9, 2019.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the assigned IRB application number. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,
APPENDIX D

UAB IRB AMENDMENT APPROVAL LETTER
APPROVAL LETTER

TO:   Kirkland, Randi

FROM: University of Alabama at Birmingham Institutional Review Board  
      Federalwide Assurance # FWA00005960  
      IORG Registration # IRB00000196 (IRB 01)  
      IORG Registration # IRB00000726 (IRB 02)

DATE:  21-Mar-2018

RE:     IRB-300000884  
        Instructor Presence in Online Courses: A Qualitative Study of Student and Instructor Perspectives

The IRB reviewed and approved the Revision/Amendment submitted on 19-Mar-2018 for the above referenced project. The review was conducted in accordance with UAB's Assurance of Compliance approved by the Department of Health and Human Services.

Type of Review: Exempt (Category 1)  
Determination: Approved  
Approval Date:  21-Mar-2018

Documents Included in Review:
- praf.180226  
- pptletter(students).clean.180309  
- consent(students).clean.180309  
- surveyquest(students).clean.180309
APPENDIX E

UA IRB RENEWAL
November 9, 2018

Randi Kirkland
Department of ELPTS
College of Education
The University of Alabama
Box 870302

Re: IRB # 18-012-R1 “Instructor Presence in Online Courses: A Qualitative Study of Student and Instructor Perspectives”

Dear Ms. Kirkland:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your renewal application. Your renewal application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your application will expire on November 8, 2019. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of Continuing Review and Closure Form. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of FORM: Continuing Review and Closure.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,
APPENDIX F

INITIAL FACULTY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
The following initial questions will guide the instructor interviews. The category of instructor presence as described by Richardson et al. (2015) is provided in parentheses. Follow-up questions based on instructor’s responses will be asked to increase understanding of the instructor experience.

1. Please tell me about your experience in {insert course}.
2. What was your role in the course?
   a. How did you interact in the course?
3. How was the course organized? (Organization)
   a. How did you decide on the organization of the course?
   b. Did you work with an Instructional Designer to develop the course?
   c. How do you think the organization of your course affected your students’ experience in the course?
4. What instruction or direction did you provide for students? (Organization)
   a. How do you think this affected your students’ experience in the course?
5. What did you do to help the course run smoothly? (Maintaining)
   a. Did you provide instruction on how to navigate the course?
   b. How was technical support provided?
   c. Did you send reminders to students? How often? What were the subjects of the reminders?
   d. How do you think these things contributed to student success in the course?
6. What instructional materials were provided in the course? (Sense-Making)
   a. What types of examples or demonstrations did you provide?
   b. How did you help to clarify misunderstandings?
   c. What feedback did you provide on assessments? Was feedback personalized by student?
7. How did you facilitate communication about the course? (Facilitating)
   a. How did you communicate with your students when they had questions about the course?
   b. What types of discussion or assignments requiring students to interact with each other were assigned?
   c. Tell me about your participation in the course discussions and other forms of communication.
   d. What was helpful and not helpful regarding course communication?
8. What kind of additional support did you provide students to help them to be successful in the course, assignments, or your career? (Advocating)
9. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experience in the course? Benefits, challenges?
APPENDIX G

INITIAL STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
The following initial questions will guide the student interviews. The category of instructor presence as described by Richardson et al. (2015) is provided in parentheses. Follow-up questions based on student responses will be asked to increase understanding of the student experience.

1. Please tell me about your experience in {insert course}.
2. What was the instructor’s role in the course?
   a. How did the instructor interact in the course?
3. How was the course organized? (Organization)
   a. How did this affect your experience in the course?
4. What instruction or direction were provided? (Organization)
   a. How did this affect your experience in the course?
5. What did the instructor do to help the course run smoothly? (Maintaining)
   a. Did you have instruction on how to navigate the course?
   b. How was technical support provided?
   c. Were reminders sent? For what?
   d. How did these things affect your success in the course?
   e. How did these things affect your satisfaction in the course?
6. What instructional materials were provided in the course? (Sense-Making)
   a. What instructional materials were helpful in learning the concepts?
   b. What types of examples or demonstrations were provided, if any?
   c. How did the instructor help to clarify misunderstandings?
   d. What feedback did you receive on assessments? What was helpful or not helpful?
   e. How did assessments or feedback affect your satisfaction with the course?
7. How did the instructor facilitate communication about the course? (Facilitating)
   a. How did you communicate with your instructor when you had questions about the course?
   b. What types of discussion or assignments requiring students to interact with each other were assigned?
   c. Tell me about how the instructor participated in the discussion?
   d. What was helpful and not helpful regarding course communication?
   e. How did instructor communication affect your satisfaction with the course?
8. How did the instructor provide additional support for you to be successful in the course or assignments, or your career? (Advocating)
9. How did the instructor provide additional support for you to be successful in preparing for your career? (Advocating)
10. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experience in the course? Benefits, challenges?
APPENDIX H

STUDENT INTERVIEW AND SURVEY QUESTIONS
When the method was changed from focus group to phone interview, web interview, or online survey, some questions were slightly updated. Questions 1-18 were the parts of the consent form and demographic questions.

Q19 Please tell me about your experience in { } 
Q20 What was the instructor’s role in the course? 
Q21 How did the instructor interact in the course? 
Q22 How was the course organized? 
Q23 How did the organization of the course affect your experience in the course? 
Q24 What instruction or direction were provided? 
Q25 How did the provided instruction/direction affect your experience in the course? 
Q26 What did the instructor do to help the course run smoothly? 
Q27 Did you have instruction on how to navigate the course? 
Q28 How was technical support provided? 
Q29 Were reminders sent? If so, for what? 
Q30 How did the navigation instructions, technical support, and/or reminders affect your success in the course? 
Q36 How did any of the previously mentioned items affect your satisfaction in the course? 
Q31 What instructional materials were provided in the course? 
Q32 What instructional materials were helpful in learning the concepts? 
Q33 What types of examples or demonstrations were provided, if any? 
Q35 How did the instructor help to clarify misunderstandings? 
Q34 What feedback did you receive on assessments? What was helpful or not helpful? 
Q37 How did assessments or feedback affect your satisfaction with the course? 
Q38 How did the instructor facilitate communication about the course? 
Q39 How did you communicate with your instructor when you had questions about the course? 
Q40 What types of discussion or assignments requiring students to interact with each other were assigned? 
Q41 Tell me about how the instructor participated in the discussion. 
Q42 What was helpful and not helpful regarding course communication? 
Q43 How did instructor communication affect your satisfaction with the course? 
Q44 How did the instructor provide additional support for you to be successful in the course or assignments, or your career? 
Q45 Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experience in the course? 
Benefits, challenges?